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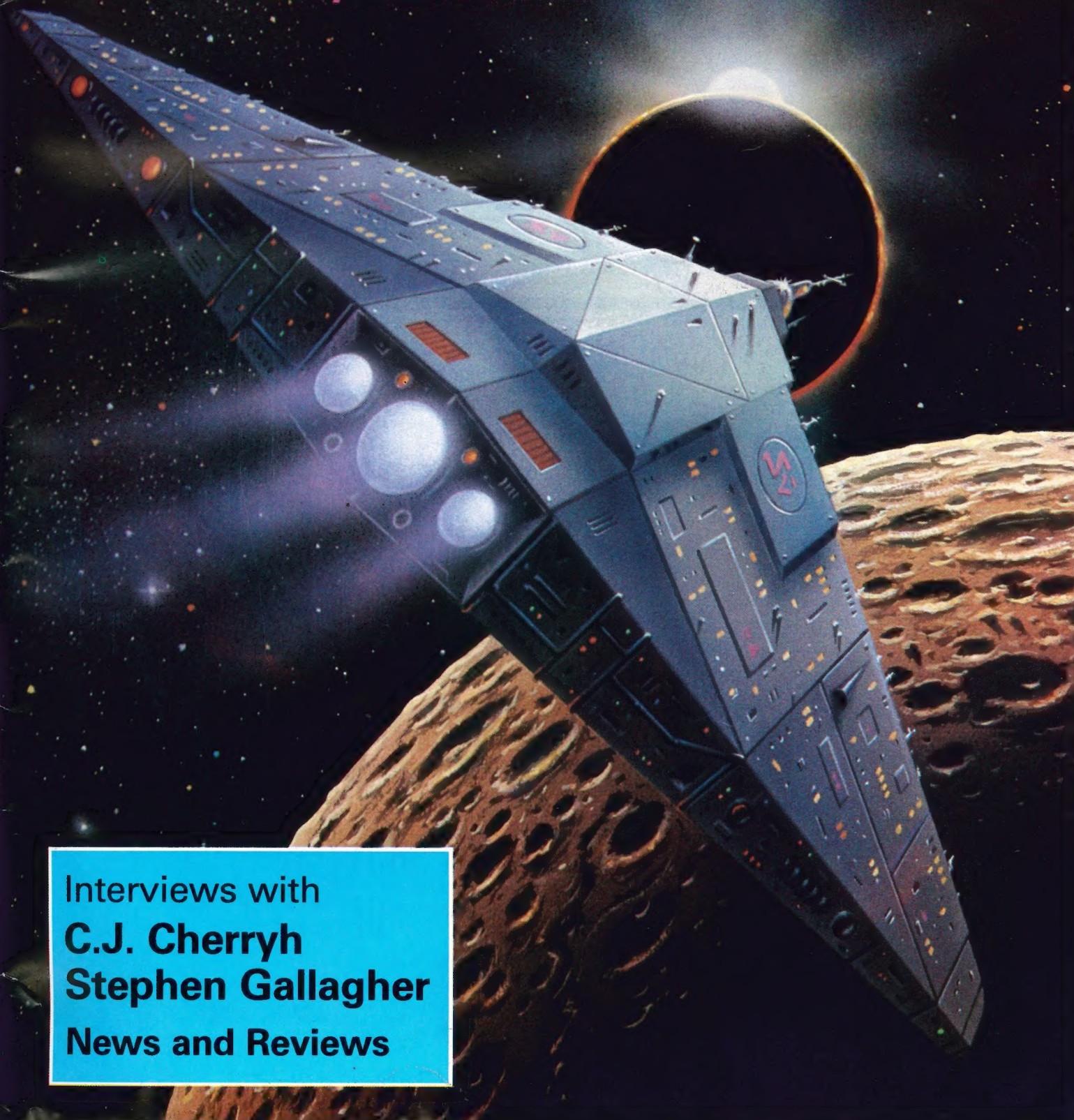
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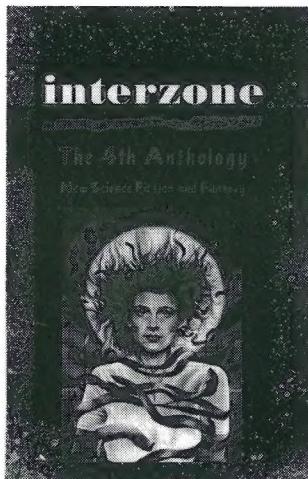
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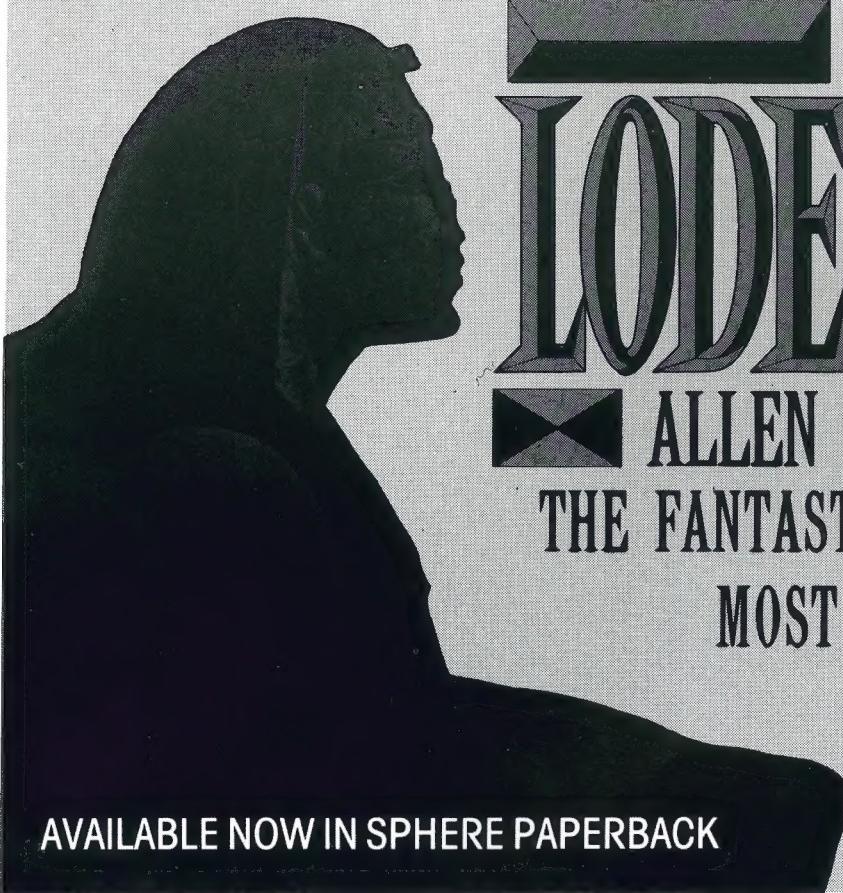
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SCIENCE FICTION AND FANTASY

No 31**September/October 1989**

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Interface

David Pringle

A special "all space-story" issue this time – which doesn't reflect any grand change of policy on our part, but merely the fact that we had a lot of space fiction in hand plus a good *David Hardy* cover to go with it. I'm pleased to welcome such authors as *John Gribbin* and *Gwyneth Jones* to our pages (neither has published any fiction here before, although the latter once contributed an article) and, of course, it's good to see the return of *S.M. Baxter*, *Eric Brown* and *Charles Stross*, all of whom have growing reputations among the regular readers of this magazine. Next time, we shall be returning to the usual wider mix of sf and fantasy stories. See the "Coming Next Issue" announcement at the end of this editorial: *Interzone* 32 will be another very strong issue.

AN ALDISS MOVIE AT LAST

Currently in production is *Roger Corman's Frankenstein Unbound*, a movie based on *Brian Aldiss's* 1973 novel about a time-traveller who meets both Mary Shelley and her creations – Victor Frankenstein and his monster. It is the first film Corman has directed in almost two decades, and according to *Variety* magazine its budget is some \$10 million. Brian Aldiss has been involved in script discussions, and was due to visit the location in Milan during June. According to Frank Hatherley of Avernus Creative Media (the company which launched Aldiss's "Science Fiction Blues" roadshow last year and which has sold the film rights of *Frankenstein Unbound* to Hollywood), "relations between Aldiss and Corman are excellent" and "further joint projects are underway." I hope to hear much more of them, and I also hope that *Interzone* will be running some new fiction (and possibly some non-fiction) by Brian Aldiss within the next year.

The Polish national science-fiction convention, *Polcon '89*, to be held in Gdansk, 30th November-3rd December 1989, has Brian Aldiss as its guest of honour, along with the Soviet writer Kir Bulytschov. Anyone who wishes to attend from overseas may do so for \$84 US, which includes "board, accommodation, sightseeing in Gdansk and all Con materials." Which sounds very reasonable. The address is: Gdanski Klub Fantastyki, Chylonska 191, 81-007 Gdynia, Poland.

Still on the subject of conventions: "Fantasycon XIV," the British Fantasy Society's annual gathering, will take

place at the Midland Hotel, Birmingham, 6th-8th October 1989. American guest of honour is *Thomas F. Monteleone* and British guest is *Stephen Laws*, with *Brian Lumley* as master of ceremonies. Attending memberships are £12 to BFS members, £14 to non-members, payable to Fantasycon XIV, 15 Stanley Rd., Morden, Surrey SM4 5DE.

NEBULA & BSFA AWARDS

Here are the latest winners of the Nebula Award, decided by the membership of the Science Fiction Writers of America (the sf authors' trade union, so to speak). The awards are for works first published in the USA in 1988:

Best Novel: *Falling Free* by Lois McMaster Bujold

Best Novella: "The Last of the Winnebagos" by Connie Willis

Best Novelette: "Schrodinger's Kitten" by George Alec Effinger

Best Short Story: "Bible Stories for Adults, No. 17: The Deluge" by James Morrow

Grand Master: Ray Bradbury

Also announced recently were the results of the BSFA Awards, decided by the membership of the British Science Fiction Association. These are also for works first published or released in 1988:

Best Novel: *Mythago Wood* by Robert Holdstock

Best Short Story: "Dark Night in Toyland" by Bob Shaw

Best Media Presentation: Who Framed Roger Rabbit? dir. Robert Zemeckis

Best Artist: Alan Lee

(The Bob Shaw story was first published in *Interzone* 26, and has since been reprinted as the title piece of Shaw's most recent collection from Gollancz.)

PUBLISHING CHANGES

The British publishing scene is constantly changing, and many of its upheavals affect our field. Sphere Books, formerly owned by the Penguin group, has been taken over by Macdonald/Futura, a general publishing imprint owned by Robert Maxwell, and as a result the Sphere science-fiction and fantasy list will be absorbed into the larger sf list which already exists at Macdonald. The editor in charge of this combined "Orbit" imprint is the newly-promoted John Jarrold. A longtime sf fan, he now becomes a real power in the land of science-fiction publishing. The former

sf editor at Sphere, *Martin Fletcher*, has settled into a new job at Pan Books, where he will be working on the non-sf Picador list. These changes have affected *Interzone* author *Eric Brown*: his debut collection, *The Time-Lapsed Man*, which we announced a couple of issues ago, will not after all be published by Sphere – instead, it has been resold to Pan (where the sf editor is *Kathy Gale*).

Robyn Sisman, the editor who commissioned the first four *Interzone* anthologies (initially at Dent, later at Simon & Schuster), has now become Managing Director of Hutchinson (part of Century Hutchinson Ltd). Unfortunately, this big career step for her means that she is no longer involved with science fiction. We shall miss her, and we wish her well. The new editor in charge of fiction at Simon & Schuster Ltd is *Maureen Waller*. Among the books which she inherits is of course our fourth anthology, out this August. As I said in last issue's editorial, this book contains three original stories – by *S. M. Baxter*, *Richard Calder* and *Rachel Pollack* – in addition to a selection of the best from the magazine's past year.

WHO IS JACK YEOVIL?

The *Night Mayor*, a first novel by *Kim Newman*, is forthcoming this month from Simon & Schuster (in fact, it should be appearing simultaneously with *Interzone: The 4th Anthology*, from the same publisher). It's a nastily amusing science-fiction tale with a film-noir feel, and I recommend it highly. But it's not the only book that Kim has written of late: his "Warhammer Fantasy" novel, *Drachenfels*, will be appearing shortly afterwards from *G. W. Books* – the new subsidiary of Games Workshop Ltd, situated at 34 West St., Brighton BN1 2RE – where I work as Series Editor. The latter novel carries the pseudonym Jack Yeovil (who was a character in "Dreamers," Kim's first short story for *Interzone*), but it's written with all Newman's customary wicked humour and irrepressible inventiveness. Gruesome fun. A horror/fantasy yarn about a sympathetic female vampire pitted against a hideous age-old monster, it should appeal both to fans of the "Warhammer" game and to a wider readership.

Other *Interzone* authors who have written fiction based on the backgrounds of Games Workshop products include *Brian Stableford*, whose fantasy novel *Zaragoz*, as by *Brian Craig*, will be out soon; *William King*, who has produced a stream of short stories for the first several "Warhammer" anthologies; *Nicola Griffith*, who is also writing short stories; *Steve Baxter*, whose ingenious novelette "The Star Boat" should prove a high-point of the

Continued on page 74

Eric Brown

Star-Crystals and Karmel

I was on Addenbrooke for three months before I met Lorraine Lomax – which, I later learned, was something of a record. Lomax kept herself to herself, for obvious reasons, and not many of the settlers in Magenta Bay had made her acquaintance.

The meeting – I feel like calling it my audience – came about unexpectedly one warm evening towards the end of Spring. I was savouring an imported whisky on the verandah and watching Torr and Shama walking hand in hand along the beach, for all the world like human lovers. My reverie was interrupted when a ground-effect vehicle pulled up beside the A-frame. I tried to decide if I felt bitter that my privacy was about to be invaded, or glad of the company. I think I secretly welcomed the opportunity to talk to someone other than myself – then the wing-hatch of the vehicle hinged up and the invalid carriage glided out.

I'd heard a lot about Lorraine Lomax. She was the talk of the township, which was to be expected as the only other topics of interest were the tourist trade and the weather. The regulars down at the Magenta Bay Club were lucky to have such a focus of interest in the vicinity – and fortunate also in that Lomax's arrival on the colony planet pre-dated their own, so that there was no way their gossip might be verified, or dismissed.

Lomax was the first settler on this northerly continent, ten years ago, and the events surrounding her injuries had never been disclosed. Rumour had it that they were the result of a mechanical accident; another that she had fallen prey to a jungle predator. Her determination to continue running the plantation and her reclusive existence in the mansion over at Barnett's Landfall served only to add to the mystery.

As I watched the carriage hover from the vehicle, my apprehension had nothing to do with the fact that her visit would soon be public knowledge. I could put up with any amount of gossip, and had done so since the day of my arrival. The reason for my unease was that I felt uncomfortable in the presence of beautiful women and those physically less fortunate than myself – and Lomax just happened to be both.

She settled her carriage beside me with a barely perceptible whirr of a-grav turbos, smiled and held out a hand in such a way as to leave me in doubt whether she wanted it kissed or shaken – "Henderson – so pleased to meet you at last. I've heard a lot about you."

I murmured that this was surely an exaggeration

and took her hand in a loose shake. I busied myself fixing her a drink and stole glances while she sighed and smiled at the view of the bay.

Just as the beauty of the Venus de Milo is emphasized by the absence of arms, so Lorraine Lomax's poised elegance seemed to be accentuated by the fact that her torso terminated abruptly just below the ribcage. Her carriage was bulky and ugly, but she had managed to transform the life-support mechanism into a throne; there was something almost regal in her demeanour.

We drank and exchanged idle chatter. I found myself talking about my past and the reason I came to Addenbrooke, something which I usually keep to myself. A couple of whiskies later I was aware that I'd run off at the mouth like a damned fool, and also that I knew next to nothing about Lorraine Lomax.

She was staring at the Ring of Tharssos, the arc of silver moonlets that embraced the hemisphere from horizon to horizon. I took this opportunity to mention the alien festivities due to take place in less than a week. Lomax made some off-hand comment about the natives, pronouncing the word with a certain venom I was to notice later in her dealings with all things alien.

She changed the subject. "You're probably wondering why I called on you?"

I shrugged. "A social visit?" My humour was lost on her.

"I've seen some of your stones, Henderson – those star-crystals, I think you call them. I'm quite impressed. And my daughter likes them, too –"

"Your daughter?" I must have sounded surprised – certainly I could never recall hearing that Lorraine Lomax had a daughter.

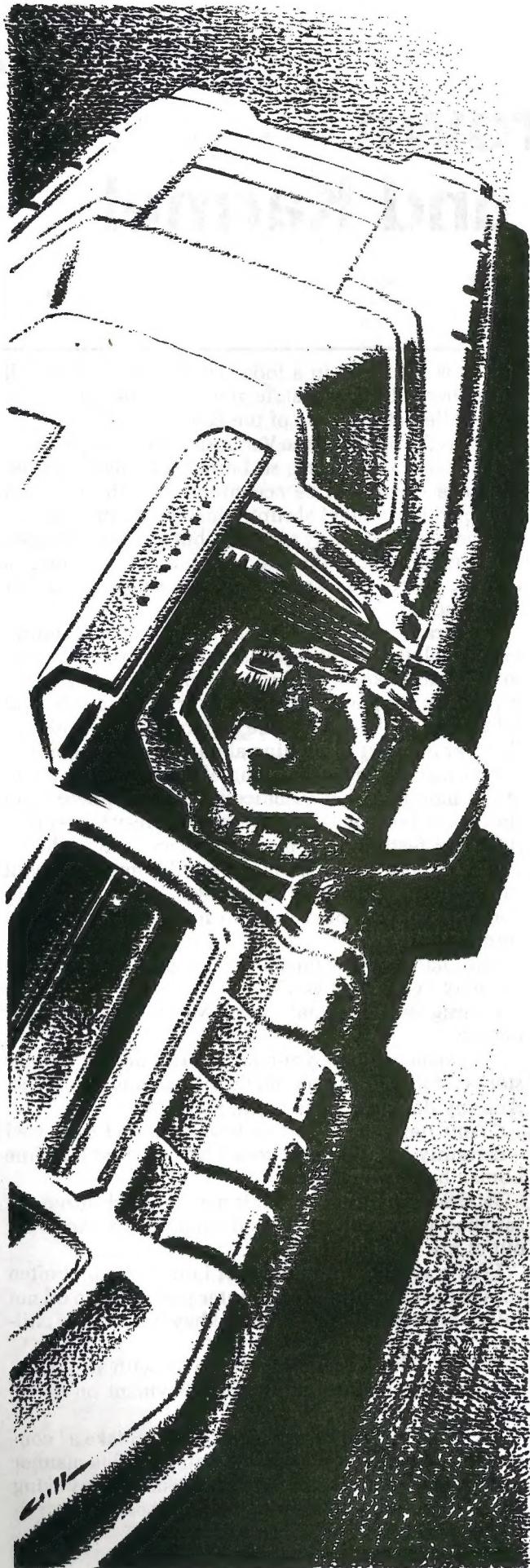
"Karmel is at that difficult age when children are satisfied with nothing. I need something to keep her out of my way while I work."

I felt a sudden resentment of Lomax, then; it often comes over me when I encounter parents who do not fully appreciate how fortunate they are to have children.

"Do you think you might run over with a consignment of star-crystals tomorrow? Payment on delivery?"

I wanted to ask her why she could not take a "consignment" back with her this evening, but her manner intimidated. She was obviously accustomed to having her every word obeyed, her purchases hand delivered, and would brook no dissent.

I began to pity poor Karmel.



She finished her drink and thanked me for a pleasant evening. I watched the carriage glide from the verandah and slot itself into the ground-effect vehicle. "Are you sure you're okay in that thing?" I called from the top of the steps. "You've had a bit to drink."

She smiled up at me. "That's quite all right, Henderson. Alcohol has no effect on me. I have an artificial liver implant that purifies all harmful fluids..."

I watched her reverse down the drive and accelerate along the coast road, resentment burning in my chest. I did not like Lorraine Lomax – and it had nothing to do with the fact that she had consumed my whisky without due appreciation. I disliked her attitude, her assumed superiority. At the same time I could not deny that I was strangely attracted to her physical aspect, the little of it that had survived the accident unscathed.

I finished the bottle, by which stage I hated myself thoroughly, staggered into the lounge and fell asleep on the chesterfield while the vid-screen repeated an old romantic movie from Earth.

The following evening I shut the showroom and drove along the coast road for a kilometre, then turned inland through the rain-forest. I passed files of small, semi-naked Ashentay walking along the roadside; these were tribes from outlying areas, making their way to the local clan dwelling-places around the bay. When human colonists first settled in Magenta, many Ashentay moved out rather than have their way of life changed by what they saw as human materialism; a few remained and worked in the shops and boatyards around the settlement. In general, the aliens and humans kept themselves to themselves, though I'd heard that in the capital, a thousand miles down the coast, and in some of the larger cities of the south, alien-human relations were such that intermarriage was not uncommon. In some areas, a first generation of Ashentay-humans was growing up.

Now the emigrés were returning for the festivities, the Say-nath'an-dar. I had to admit that I knew very little about the aliens, even though I'd been on the planet almost three months. I'd heard talk of the Say-nath'an-dar down at the club, but all I could recall was that there was a special, or privileged, clan of nomadic Ashentay who spent their lives following the Ring of Tharsos around the planet, and that the ceremonies would begin with their arrival in Magenta Bay.

The Lomax plantation was a small concern, just ten square kilometres of lush interior land. The base of the operations – an old-style colonial mansion – was situated a kilometre beyond the perimeter fence, along a straight track hemmed in by files of alien fruit trees.

I drew up before the steps of the mansion and climbed out, case in hand. The house was old, certainly predating the time when the planet was settled. I guessed that the building, foursquare and brooding in the twilight, had been telemassed directly to Addenbrooke from Earth.

"Henderson!"

I turned. Lorraine Lomax was approaching the house in her carriage, gliding along at a height of one metre. From a distance, the contraption reminded me of nothing so much as an old boot. Coupled to its heel

was a long train of wheeled containers, brimful with shiny purple fruit the size of melons. A tall, six-legged spider-bot clanked alongside. As they approached, the robot uncoupled the containers and continued with them around the house.

Lomax gestured. "Henderson, you must forgive me. I've been working since six this morning, and as you can see..."

She indicated her face, masked with perspiration and greasy fingermarks. She wore a loose khaki shirt, and the last stud was unfastened so that I could see where the tanned skin of her slim stomach fitted into the collar of her life-support system.

She escorted me through the mansion to a long verandah overlooking a valley patterned with rows of fruit trees. She indicated a small table laden with a variety of bottles. "Please make yourself at home. Excuse me while I change and find Karmel." She smiled, turned and hovered back into the house.

I poured myself a Scotch and stared into the valley. Whereas yesterday Lorraine Lomax had seemed distant, even cold, this evening she was just the opposite. I wondered if she was one of those nervous people who are never very good at initial encounters, but who take only one meeting to form an opinion of one's character.

I operate quite differently. In my line of work it helps if I get along with everyone I meet; but I take a long time before I can say whether or not I like someone. I was still very unsure about Lorraine Lomax.

I was on my second drink when she returned.

She pushed through the french-windows with the toe of her carriage. "Henderson, meet my daughter, Karmel. Karmel, this is Mr Henderson. He's brought you something."

Karmel was perhaps ten years old; she was slim and sun-browned – the word elfin sprang to mind. Her face was triangular, disconcertingly equilateral, and her eyes were large and green.

She beamed at me. "You've brought the crystals?"

She sat cross-legged on the floor while I laid the carrycase before her and opened the lid. The dozen gems scintillated against the black velvet. The little girl stared at them with the eyes of a cat suddenly transfixed. "May I?"

"Go ahead." I smiled up at Lomax.

Her expression was aloof; she was watching her daughter with barely concealed impatience. I remembered her attitude towards Karmel last night, and that she regarded her as a minor nuisance who could be kept quiet with gifts.

Karmel reached into the case and pulled out a star-crystal. She held it tightly in her fist, then pressed it against her cheek.

She dropped the crystal, a slight frown marring her features, and picked up another. She went through the same performance with this one, and again discarded it. Then another, and another. Soon the case was empty and the discard pile was a small mountain, winking rainbow colours. Karmel looked up at me with tears in her lustrous eyes.

"But they aren't right," she cried in a piping voice. "They're... spoiled!" She looked up at her mother and brought her hands down on her knees in a frustrated palms-up gesture. Then she switched her exasperated attention to me. "I'm sorry, Mr Henderson.

But don't you see? They're too full of you!"

I laughed. "Full of me?"

"I thought you were bringing crystals like the other one, only... warmer."

"Do you still have that crystal?" I asked.

"I'll go and find it," Lomax said.

While her mother moved back into the house, Karmel poked a finger into the pile of star-crystals and stirred.

"What do you mean, Karmel – they're too full of me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. They're... You cut them, didn't you? You put yourself into them." She gestured again, frustrated at the hopelessness of trying to explain to an adult what was obvious.

Lomax returned with the crystal and passed it to me.

It was one of my earliest efforts, crude and amateurish. I'd cut and polished to the best of my ability, but I'd been unable to unlock the promise of the star-crystal burning beneath the surface.

"This isn't half so pretty as those," I pointed out.

Karmel took it from my hand and smiled. "But it feels so much better!"

I looked at Lomax. "It's strange, but have you noticed that the Ashentay often carry them around? They finger them like worry-beads... If you like," I said to Karmel, "you can pop round to my showroom after school sometimes. I'll show you some that I haven't got round to cutting yet. You might like those."

She was staring into the original crystal. "I don't go to school, Mr Henderson."

Her mother explained: "We have a terminal in the study. She has all the latest lessons telemassed from Earth."

"In that case why not bring her over tomorrow?" I think I said this because I felt sorry for the girl, imprisoned in the mansion with a mother whose idea of affection was an expensive present.

Karmel looked from me to her mother. "Will you?"

Lomax sighed. "You can go, but one of the automations will have to drive you. I'm much too busy with the harvest."

Karmel smiled at me and went running off into the house, tossing the gem into the air and catching it like a ball.

I packed away the star-crystals.

Later we sat on the verandah, sipping mint tea from china cups and admiring the sunset. Down in the valley, mechanical harvesters moved along the rows of fruit trees. For as far as the eye could see, the green plantation was networked with a silver web of tracks; spider-bots supervised the picking and drove container trains to packing stations.

I mentioned something that I had noticed earlier. "Don't you employ Ashentay?" I asked.

I'd heard a rumour that, ten years ago, Lorraine Lomax had been in dispute with a group of native workers, and the upshot was that she had fired them on the spot and vowed never to employ them again.

She sipped her tea, considering my question. "The Ashentay are poor workers, Henderson. They're hunter-gatherers in their natural environment, and they don't adapt well to farm work. Automation is

much more cost-effective."

A little later it occurred to me that the plantation must hold bad memories for her, and I wondered why she stayed on. "Haven't you ever thought of selling up and leaving Addenbrooke?" I asked her.

She hesitated, then said, "With a little luck I'll be leaving quite soon." She gazed out over her plantation. "Did you know that the latest resurrection techniques can equip me with an extended spine, a new pelvis, hips and legs? They have clinics on Earth that clone the requisite parts.

I whistled. "That must be expensive."

She looked at me. "Why do you think I've remained here for so long, Henderson?"

We finished our tea. Lomax excused herself and I drove back to Magenta Bay.

In the morning I set off along the beach in search of "unspoilt" crystals for Karmel. In their natural state, the stones were unspectacular, even ugly; they could be found only in coastal areas, lying where the Ashentay had picked them up, caressed them and put them back down again. Only my training as a geologist had drawn my attention to them three months ago — I had known that within the unsightly, calcined gobbets there were things of lapidary beauty.

As I walked, I kept a look out for a certain type of crystal that I had only ever seen once before; these were twice the size of the regular crystals, and dull, but with a stone inside that would make the Koh-i-nor look like a pebble. Soon after my arrival on Addenbrooke I had come across an old Ashentay sitting on a rock on the headland, gazing out to sea and turning just such a stone in his fingers. I had made him an offer for it, but in his halting English he conveyed that no amount of money could pay for the thole, as he called it. He was right, of course, for the crystal was priceless — though I rather think that it was worth more to the old alien than it would be to any human being. Now, I selected the largest crystals I could find and made my way back home.

I was in the workshop an hour later when the Lomax ground-effect vehicle pulled up. I stepped outside just as Karmel jumped down from the passenger seat. She was wearing an old pair of dungarees, with the legs rolled up to just below the knees, and a frilly white blouse.

"Hi, Mr Henderson. I'm here." In the vehicle, a gleaming silver spider-bot sat in the driver's seat, jacked into the steering column.

"Have you got the good crystals, Mr Henderson?"

"Let's go and have a look, shall we?"

As we walked to the house, Karmel slipped her hand into mine and jumped up the steps one by one. It came to me suddenly that no daughter should be without a father, and I remembered the rumours that Lorraine Lomax's husband had moved to Earth soon after her accident.

I fixed Karmel a tumbler of orange juice, and when I came in from the kitchen I saw that she was tapping the holo-cube on top of the vid-set. The small figure of the girl, locked inside the plastic, began smiling and talking.

Karmel gulped down the juice. "Who's that?" she asked.

I began to tell her, and then she saw the carrycase

on the chesterfield. "The crystals!" she cried.

I opened the case on the floor and she fell to her knees and stared with wide eyes at the treasure. She reached out — hesitantly, it seemed, as if she did not want to be disappointed for a second time. When her fingers came into contact with the first stone she shrieked as if electrocuted.

She scooped up the stones and pressed them against her cheek as if they were baby chicks. She giggled with delight and seemed totally oblivious of my presence. For the next twenty minutes I watched her inspect each stone in turn, talking to herself in an excited whisper. I asked if I could hold one, but when I failed to feel anything she shook her head in exasperation, before losing herself again in rapturous communion with the crystals.

It occurred to me that perhaps the mystery was not in the crystals themselves, but in the mind of the recipient, and maybe human adults had outgrown that vital spark of imagination needed to believe... Watching Karmel as she played among the stones, I saw that as a cold and cynical rationalization. We try to explain away what we don't understand, and I certainly didn't understand how something as inorganic and stable as the crystals could be warm.

"Can I have one?" she asked at last. "Can I take one home with me?"

"You can have them all," I said.

I packed the uncut crystals into the carrycase, except one which Karmel carried back to the ground-effect vehicle. As she was about to climb inside, Shama and Torr appeared in the driveway. Karmel stopped and stared at them, her eyes widening. I realized that, due to her isolation up at the plantation, this was perhaps one of the few times Karmel had actually seen an alien at close quarters. They returned her stare, just as curious. As the vehicle reversed down the drive, all I could see of Karmel was the top of her head as she peered timorously out at the Ashentay.

I waved down at Shama and Torr. "I'm about to eat," I called. "You're welcome to join me."

They came to tend the grounds of my A-frame every week, and I always invited them in for lunch. They never accepted, however, often saying that they had eaten already, or were fasting.

I was therefore surprised when Torr said, "Thank you, Ben. We will."

They entered the lounge, and while Torr assisted his pregnant wife to the floor — she was hugely swollen and ungainly — I fetched food from the kitchen and joined them.

We ate in silence. I wanted to ask what had brought them here today — it was obvious that they needed to see me about something, I reasoned, or they would have refused my offer of food. But questions were unknown in Ashentay conversation, and in consequence there were no such things as answers. A dialogue with the aliens proceeded in a series of personal statements, to which an individual might append a subjective observation if sufficiently interested.

This peculiar form of stilted dialogue was one of the reasons why the human settlers on Addenbrooke looked upon the Ashentay as alien and therefore "unknowable." To a straight question, an alien would



merely blink at the effrontery. There was little else dividing the two races, other than the difference of life-styles. The Ashentay were a small, slight people – I often thought of them as Nordic Japanese; individually, they would not be out of place in a crowd of homo sapiens. They could even speak English in a quiet, whispery fashion.

As we finished the meal of bread, cheese and a local sap-derived beverage, I opened the exchange. I wanted to know what importance the aliens attached to the crystals – if they too found them warm.

"I am ignorant of the crystals that your people use," I said.

They exchanged a glance, remained silent.

"Karmel tells me that they are warm."

I waited. Often, if they did not wish to speak of a certain subject, they remained obdurately silent until I happened upon a topic of mutual interest.

Torr spoke at last. "We are not empowered to speak about the kantha-dan – the crystals," he said.

I nodded. The silence stretched. My guests showed no inclination to break the ice and tell me why they were here. At last I said. "I am surprised to find you here today..." In other words, what the hell do you want to see me about?

Shama sat with her distended belly resting in the bowl of her crossed-legs. She regarded her folded hands with downcast eyes and said quietly, "I learned one week ago that I am with Say-na – and therefore privileged."

My immediate impulse was to ask what was Say-na? I remembered myself and said, "I am ignorant of the phrase Say-na."

Torr said, on behalf of his partner, "It means, translated literally, 'chosen one or wanderer'."

Shama, regarding her jutting pregnancy, flushed with pride.

"I'm pleased for you both," I said, somewhat puzzled.

"Therefore," Torr continued, "Shama can no longer work for you, and I soon must migrate to the western coast, as is our custom."

I nodded gravely. "I'll miss you both."

Shama said in a whisper, "We must prepare ourselves for the approaching Say-nath'an-dar."

"I have heard little about this... Say-nath'an-dar." I looked expectantly from Shama to Torr.

He smiled. "It is the time of the Say-naths' arrival – they are the clan of travelling... you would all them 'wise-folk'. They follow the Ring of Tharssos and it takes them across every continent on Ashent. In each village or settlement they halt, rest a while, and settle major disputes. Their word is law – dissent means banishment. When their word has been carried through, the move on, continually following Tharssos." He made an open-handed gesture indicating simplicity. "In ten years they circumnavigate the planet."

Shama still had not lifted her face from contemplation of her belly. "But of course," I said. "Your child is destined to join the travelling council..."

Torr beamed. "We are proud to give our first born to the Say-nath," he said. "Tharssos willing, the child will be born shortly after their arrival – any later, and we will have to wait until the next visitation."

"Your child is due in eight days," I stated.

"And the Say-nath are due in seven days. Sometimes they stay for as long as two or three days, depending

on how many sittings they are called upon to attend. Often their work is over in one day, in which case..."

He glanced at Shama, took her hand and squeezed.

In the familiar environment of the lounge, chatting amicably to Torr and Shama, I had almost ceased to notice their alienness – even though we were discussing concepts strange to me. Only when I tried to understand their apprehension at the possibility that their child might miss the arrival of the Say-nath, did the fact of their profound psychological dissimilarity to human beings strike me. To human parents, the thought of having their child taken from them at birth would be anathema. Torr and Shama, on the other hand, were dreading the thought that they might be left with the child for the first ten years of its life.

During the week that followed I saw nothing more of Lorraine Lomax or her daughter. Word got round that Lomax had paid me a visit, and on the only occasion I went down to the club I was the centre of attention. Strangely enough, I felt no desire to divulge the little I had learned about the beautiful invalid – it was as if to talk behind her back would be to invalidate the trust that Lomax had shown in me by seeking my company and telling me, albeit guardedly, about herself. As a consequence of my reticence, the inevitable rumour spread that I was having an affair with the woman, which bothered me less than I thought it might. My work was keeping me fully occupied and I had no time to worry about idle gossip.

Quite by chance, the height of the tourist season coincided with the Say-nath'an-dar. It was not that the visitors from Earth came to Magenta Bay to witness alien ceremonies. Say-nath'an-dar was held in camera, a strictly aliens-only affair. Although the tourists were intrigued by the events – it gave their stay on Addenbrooke that frisson of otherness they could talk about when they got back home – the main attraction of the area was the temperate climate and the spectacular coastal views.

At noon on the first day of the festivities I shut up shop and made my way, with hundreds of other curious humans, around the bay. We lined the coast road in anticipation, a gala-day atmosphere in the air.

That morning, the Ashentay population of Magenta Bay had quietly left the settlement to keep their rendezvous with the Say-nath at a port town along the coast. Now they marched back into Magenta in a spectacular torch-light procession, the wise-council leading the way. Clad only in loin-clothes, they were impressive figures, sun-browned and muscular from their arduous, never-ending trek across the face of the planet. They were of greater stature than the average Ashentay, and they seemed to emanate a certain calm assurance, an authority that even I, as a human, could not fail to notice. There were perhaps two dozen of them in total, ranging from sprightly oldsters to children of no more than four or five – and even the youngsters were possessed of a quiet dignity that had nothing in common with bravado.

When the procession reached the quayside, the Say-nath disappeared into the rain-forest, and the remaining Ashentay population produced stringed instruments and proceeded to entertain both their own people and the humans. I stayed and listened to

the melodic ballads and epic poems for a while, then returned home for a drink.

The real ceremony, the Say-nath'an-dar, would take place tomorrow, when the wise-council convened to pass judgement on the major issues of the day.

Iwoke late, grabbed a carton of fruit juice from the cooler and staggered out onto the verandah, hoping that the combination of a cold drink and the fresh sea breeze might do something to revive me. I was messily drinking orange juice, and naked but for a pair of shorts, when I saw the slight figure of Torr approaching along the coast road. Six Ashentay followed him, but only when they turned into the drive and paused at the foot of the steps did I recognize the tall, muscular aliens as members of the Say-nath.

Something in my stomach turned like a live eel.

Torr looked up at me. "Ben Henderson, you will be present at a sitting of the Say-nath..."

I recalled what Torr had told me yesterday: that the Say-nath were brought in to adjudicate on major issues only.

"What's the problem, Torr?" I asked nervously.

It was a question. Torr frowned. "The sitting will proceed forthwith. I will act as translator. The Say-nath have no use for the human tongue."

Torr turned and spoke to the six, then ushered them up the steps. I stood back and watched as they took the verandah like a stage and spaced themselves in a semi-circle, sitting cross-legged and regarding me impassively. The weight of unspoken accusation hung in the air. I wanted to grab Torr and shake him until he told me what the hell was going on.

An old man and an old woman occupied the apex of the crescent, with a younger man and woman on either side, and at each end a young boy and girl.

Torr touched my arm. I sensed his compassion for me, which he was unable to communicate in his official position as translator to the Say-nath. He indicated that I should be seated before the six, and then sat down beside me.

The old man uttered a halting approximation of my name, then held out his arm, his hand palm-upwards. The five other Say-nath then did the same, so that their long, slim arms formed the spoke of a wheel, their piled palms the hub. Torr gestured for me to place my hand on theirs, and he completed the ritual by placing his hand on mine. The old man chanted what I took to be an oath, and the swearing in ceremony was over.

Then he took a pouch from his loin-cloth, opened the drawstring and poured onto the floor before him a glittering pile of star-crystals. Among the gems that I had cut were several crystals in their original state. And also – I noticed with disbelief – two large uncut stones the like of which I had seen only once before, three months ago, when I had happened upon the alien with the crystal he had called a thole.

The six Say-nath regarded me unblinkingly.

The old man leaned forward and chopped a hand down into the pile of stones, deftly dividing the uncut crystals and the tholes from those I had worked. He drew to him the uncut crystals and the priceless gems, and pushed to me the stones I sold in my showroom.

He picked up one of the former, held it in his palm,

then placed it at his forehead like a third eye. He distributed the rest of the crystals to his fellow Say-nath; they went through the same ritual, the same act of appreciation.

Then the old man – looking into my eyes – spoke in the quick, high tongue of his people. I could understand nothing of what he said, but the note of censure in his voice was unmistakable.

He came to the end of his speech and gestured for Torr to translate. In his soft, whispery English, Torr said, "The kantha-dan crystals contain the Shira, the very essence or selfness, of our ancestors. Each kantha-dan contains a story, a life-story, that can be experienced only through kantha-dan-akra, deep-communiion. The kantha-dan belong to each and every Ashentay – they are as free as the essence of the ancestors they contain, and therefore are never collected as you humans might collect and horde such treasure, but are left where everyone might happen upon them and gain from the experience of deep-communion. They were safe until you came and began to shape the stones, cut them, remove from their hearts the very essence of our ancestors and replace them with your own self. Of course, we realize that you were not to know of the sacrilege you were committing – you were acting in innocence, yet with the motives of gain that seem to drive your race. Because you are human, Ben Henderson, and because you were unaware of your error, the Say-nath cannot see their way to punishing you."

He paused there and spoke to the six.

The cynical, hard-bitten side of myself, which I tried to project to the community of Magenta Bay, almost laughed at such superstitious hokum; it was as if the rationalist in me, forced into a corner and resenting the Say-nath's accusations, wanted to kick out and deny culpability. I thought of what this would do for trade, if I advertised the star-crystals as containing the Shira of the Ashentay...

Then I recalled what little Karmel Lomax had said after holding one of the crystals I had cut. "They're too full of you!" They were too full of my anger – and how better she thought the original, uncut crystals had felt.

I frowned. "I see no reason why you should capture your selves, your memories, in this way." It was as if I was disputing their claim so as to be free of the charge of desecration.

Torr made a gesture that eloquently illustrated his incomprehension. "We do it because...because we have always done so. Through the crystals, our ancestors speak to us, teach us, guide us."

"And do every one of you make a kantha-dan?"

He smiled at my question. "Not everyone. A chosen few, those judged to have knowledge and wisdom."

I wanted then to ask him how, how these simple people imbued inorganic crystal with their Shira, but before I could even begin to phrase my question Torr continued.

"If you refuse to stop desecrating our stones, Ben Henderson, then the Say-nath would have no option but to take the matter to your planetary Governor."

The star-crystals accounted for less than twenty percent of my turnover. I would still be able to make a decent living without them, if I cut down on luxuries like imported whisky. I wondered how I might have



responded had my livelihood depended on them; I like to think I would have agreed to their request.

"Tell the Say-nath that I'll stop cutting the crystals," I said, "and I'll withdraw from sale those I've already cut."

He gripped my arm in gratitude and repeated my words to the council. Their expressions softened; they smiled with their eyes.

The old man spoke.

"He thanks you, on behalf of the Ashentay," Torr said.

In a mood of considerable levity now, the arm-spoke, hand-hub oath was repeated, and the Say-nath, after inclining their heads to me, gathered their crystals and moved down the steps.

Torr paused at the top, then turned. I saw with surprise that tears filled his eyes, so that they resembled emeralds awash with ocean. "I must thank you, Ben," he began.

"I did only what was right," I said.

"Even so, you are human. Your ways are often strange to us, but on some things we see alike."

He took my hand in a human shake, seemed to hesitate, then said, "Shama will birth our child at midnight, according to the naal. There will be celebrations at our clan dwelling-place, for the Say-nath do not move on until tomorrow, and so will take our child. I... I would be honoured, and Shama too, if you would attend the birth. You will be the first human accorded the privilege of witnessing the arrival of a Say-na, and the handing over of the thole."

"The thole?" I echoed. "The large stones I saw just now?"

"They are the special kantha-dan of the Say-nath. Following the birth of a Say-na, they are bequeathed a thole into which they will in time transfer their essence, their selfness. These tholes are valued above any other kantha-dan, and remain with the Say-na until such time as he or she chooses an individual worthy of the honour of becoming a thole-guardian."

"On Earth, these stones would be priceless."

"So too on Ashent," Torr smiled.

He turned and hurried after the departing Say-nath.

I spent the rest of the day returning the uncut stones to where I'd found them scattered around the headland, and clearing the stock of star-crystals from the showroom. I was in the workshop that evening, stacking away the last case of crystals, when a familiar vehicle rolled up the drive.

I strolled out, wiping my hands on a rag. "Lorraine – this is unexpected." I indicated the steps. "I was just about to have a drink. Why not join me?"

She smiled. "That's very kind of you, Henderson. I think I will."

Perhaps it was because I had not seen her for more than a week, but Lorraine Lomax looked more beautiful than ever tonight. She wore a black velvet evening dress, or rather the bodice of one, and her dark hair was loose about her shoulders.

She held the whisky tumbler in both hands and stared up at the Ring of Tharsos, like a High Priestess with an offering.

"I've heard that you've been invited to the birth of a Say-na," she said.

"Word certainly gets around."

"Magenta is abuzz," she smiled. "Apparently, an Ashentay worker down at the marina told a human, and it spread from there. You're certainly privileged, Henderson."

I shrugged. "To tell the truth, I'm not looking forward to it that much."

She seemed about to say something, then hesitated.

"Ben..." she said at last, and the blatant use of my first name took me aback. "The reason I came down here tonight was to invite you back to the mansion. I'd prepared a meal before I found out about your prior engagement. Of course," she said, "if you'd rather join your alien friends..."

She obviously expected me to forget the birth of the Say-na and return with her to the mansion.

"I did promise Torr," I said.

She shrugged. "Very well, Henderson. I only asked."

"Look," I said, provoked by something in her tone, "what have you got against the Ashentay?"

"Ben, please..." she began.

"Was a native responsible – ?" I managed to stop myself, but too late.

She found my gaze and stared at me with stricken eyes, and I suddenly regretted my question. She nodded. "Yes – yes, I suppose you could put it like that." She said it in a small voice and looked away.

Which, of course, explained a hell of a lot.

I imagined a lethal implement of farm machinery in the hands of a native ill-equipped to use such things, a fatal slip, a tragedy that blighted her life and soured her view of an entire race...

"I suppose I was fortunate," she went on in barely a whisper. "There was a doctor staying at the mansion when the accident happened. He did what he could for me and rushed me to the hospital in Moresby, or as much of me as he could get there. I was clinically dead when I arrived, of course, but even then they had the resources to bring me back to life – if not to make me whole again."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean to..."

She shook her head. "I haven't mentioned it to anyone in a long, long time." She finished her drink. There were tears in her eyes. "I really must be going. It's getting late –"

She returned to the ground-effect vehicle and reversed down the drive without once looking up, and I cursed myself for so insensitively seeking confirmation of that which I already suspected.

For the rest of the evening, until just before midnight, I finished off my very last bottle of imported Scotch. I told myself that it was in premature celebration of the birth of Torr and Shama's child – but the real reason was so that I would be well anaesthetized when the time came to witness the entry into the world of the Say-na. I had only ever attended one other birth in my life, and on that occasion I had passed out like many a father before me.

It was eleven-thirty by the time I carefully negotiated the steps from the verandah and set off along the road from Magenta Bay. When I came to a narrow track, I left the road and stumbled into the rain-forest. The enclosing trees shut out the light of the Ring; this was the first time I had ever ventured into the forest alone on foot, and despite my drunkenness – or perhaps because of it – I was suddenly aware

of the alienness of the place. Five minutes later I was staggering through the undergrowth, hopelessly lost, when the small figure of a young Ashentay appeared from behind a tree.

"Ben Henderson. Follow, please."

I slurred my profound gratitude and followed him through the forest. My fear, before the boy found me, was not so much that I would become lost but that I would miss the Say-na ceremony and thus disappoint Torr and Shama. I experienced a surge of relief that seemed to sober me.

At last we came to a clearing occupied by a dozen low, circular tents. A corresponding clearing in the tree-tops gave view of the Ring of Tharssos, a bright parabola in the night sky.

The boy led me through a crowd of Ashentay to a large tent, drew aside an animal-skin flap and gestured for me to enter. I ducked inside; a dozen Ashentay sat cross-legged on the ground, bathed in the roseate illumination of a hundred dancing candle-flames. Torr greeted me quietly and pulled me down beside him. Behind me, a drum beat a monotonous rhythm; someone intoned what to my ears sounded like a dirge.

"The Say-na is due soon," Torr whispered. "The Say-nath leave within one hour."

Shama lay on a pile of skins before the invited audience. The brown-skinned dome of her pregnancy swelled hugely above her parted legs, bent at the knee to ease the load. She was saturated in sweat, her head turning from side to side in pain. From time to time an old woman, the naal, forced liquid into her mouth from a gourd.

The atmosphere in the tent was heavy with heat and sweat. I felt sick at the very sight of the pregnant girl, at the thought of the pain she must endure to void what I was sure must be twins.

Shama cried out. The old woman gestured to Torr, who rushed forward and knelt beside his wife. The tempo of the drumbeat increased. The naal cradled Shama's head on her lap, and Shama moaned again.

I was taken by the ridiculous urge to shout, "Not like that!" even to rush forward and assist the delivery. They seemed to be doing nothing to ease the passage of the child. Shama screamed, a long, animal howl of pain, and thrashed about in agony.

I took what happened next to be some temporary visual aberration on my part, the result of the whisky and the stifling heat in the tent. Surely, legs could not part quite like that, or a belly split with such a rending, tearing sound of flesh and muscle and finally placenta. I gagged and closed my eyes, expecting, when I opened them again, to behold a normal birth.

A sigh of satisfaction passed through the gathered Ashentay.

The Say-na, the infant, knelt amid the remains of its mother's shattered body. As I watched, incredulous, it gained its feet with the trembling insecurity of a yearling, slipping often in the wash of spilled intestines.

Torr reached forward, sliced the umbilical cord and wrapped the mewling, upright child in furs. Then he lifted his son from the mess and carried him through the press of eager onlookers.

I leapt up and caught him by the shoulders. "Torr! You can't leave her – if we can get her to the clinic in Moresby –"

"Shama has joined the legion of Tharssos, Ben, who watch over us –"

"This is insane!"

"You cannot hold yourself responsible for the delay until the Say-nath come again."

I felt sick and dizzy from the stench of blood and faeces and the semi-digested contents of the woman's lacerated stomach.

"Let me through, Ben. My son must join the Say-nath!" He pushed past me and hurried from the tent, followed by his fellow Ashentay.

I turned back and stared into the tent. Shama was dead, her pelvis crushed like an egg-shell and her spine truncated in the frantic struggle of the Say-na to gain its freedom. In the glow of candle-light, I could see that only the upper half of her body remained intact...

I retched.

I reached out for support as my vision misted and I found the frame of the entrance. The heat and the stink, but above all the knowledge, was suddenly unbearable. I flailed aside the flap of animal skin and stumbled gratefully outside.

The Say-nath had arrived in time to collect Torr's child. They stood in the clearing with their staffs and small bundles of possessions. Torr led his son to the old man who yesterday had adjudicated at my hearing.

All that remained, I knew, was for the final rite of Say-nath'an-dar. As the Ashentay watched in silence, the old man took a large stone from his pouch and passed it to the boy – and I recognized the stone as a thole. The old man spoke and the crowd began a stirring chant.

Then the Say-nath prepared to leave, and as they said their farewells I caught sight of a small figure in their midst. She had exchanged her dungarees for a loin-cloth, and it seemed that the simple change was all it took to establish her without ambiguity as an Ashentay.

As the Say-nath slipped quietly into the forest, Karmel saw me, raised a hand and smiled before rejoining her people and following the Ring of Tharssos across the face of Addenbrooke.

The following evening Lorraine Lomax drove down from Barnett's Landfall and joined me for a nightcap. We drank beer and watched the sunset. Lomax's invalid carriage whirred gently beside me, maintaining her at an altitude conducive to conversation.

"Of course," she said, "the Ashentay are mistaken. Like all primitive peoples, they ascribe pagan superstition to scientifically explicable phenomena. The Say-na children are not the chosen ones of Tharssos, destined to follow the moon and lay down the law to the Ashentay – though, of course, believing themselves chosen, they fulfil their task with expertise. The Say-nath are the result of a genetic anomaly which is passed through the male line and recurs approximately every three generations. Many of the abnormally large foetuses are miscarried; those that go to term become the Say-nath. I had the misfortune to fall in love with an Ashentay who was unknowingly just such a carrier."

I took a long drink of beer. "So...when do you leave?"

She stared at the thole on the table before us.
"I'm taking the flight to Earth in three days," she said. "I should be able to have the operation within six months."

I took the stone and turned it over in my hand, trying to feel something, the slightest hint of warmth. Earlier, she had asked me how much she might get for it on Earth, and I had shrugged and said, "Enough..."

"You could have left Addenbrooke long ago," I said now, "with Karmel."

She stared at me. "Like this?" And she indicated the machinery that had replaced her missing half.

"But is it worth it?" I asked her. "The loss of a daughter for the stone, for the chance to be whole again?"

"That's cruel, Ben. The circumstances are very different. Your daughter is dead — you're prejudiced. I think you would have done the same, in my position."

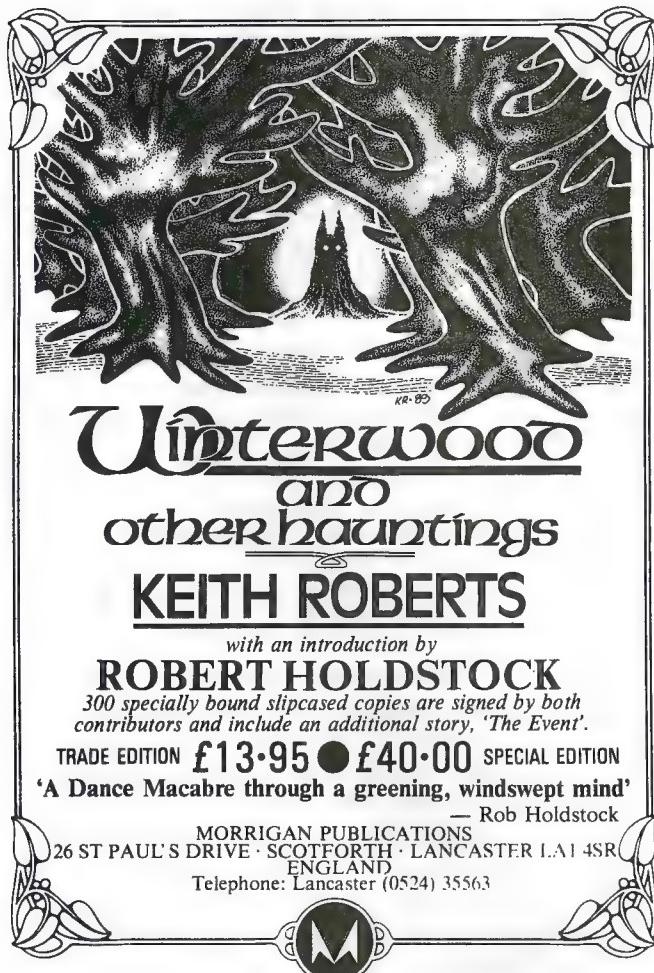
I stared at the sunset and wondered if she was right.

"Will you return to Addenbrooke?" I asked at last.

She considered this. "Oh, I should think so," she said, "occasionally."

Later I sat alone on the verandah, finished my beer and tried to imagine how much Lorraine Lomax hated her daughter. I followed the Ring of Tharsos as it diminished in perspective over the far horizon, taking with it the Ashentay Say-nath, and I wondered just how often occasionally might be.

Eric Brown won the first Interzone annual award for the most popular story we published in 1988, "The Time-Lapsed Man" (IZ 24). He is 29 years old and lives in Haworth, West Yorkshire. The above piece is his fifth contribution to this magazine, and his debut collection (which will contain all five stories, plus others) is forthcoming from Pan Books in 1990.



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Gwyneth Jones Gravegoods

They walked together on a bleak plain of seaside pebbles, captain and crew of the good ship Cheops. The sky was purple, it seemed to crackle at the edges. On a slab of shale among the pebbles there was lichen growing. They had come to see it. According to Cheops' computers this was the only life on shore, the only life on a planet.

"Imagine that," said Merle, the captain. "Lying there quietly for millions of years, marching to the beat of a different drum. What insouciance."

They stepped out into unutterable smog. The ground underfoot was squelchy red dirt; the place resembled a tropical construction site under gas attack. They were inside their suits. Eyes that should have been streaming remained calm. Skin that should have been blistering and screaming felt nothing. They groped a little way into this muck and couldn't remember why they had decided to leave the ship. Cheops didn't come out from wherever it went inbetween unless it had identified some sort of planetary system. But it had never yet found anything like a habitable world.

"I didn't like that," said Merle, back in shirt sleeves inside. "It was like being dead."

"How do you know? How would you know what that's like?" asked Sugi, the engineer. She laughed hopefully at her own joke: no one joined in.

Merle stared her down. "I think I have a pretty good idea."

They had been sent out in a spirit of purest speculation. The Cheops was the first crewed interstellar probe—ahead of its time and dazzlingly expensive. They were covering unimaginable distances, but inside the Cheops there was no perception of the time and space outside. It was a small ship. The crew environment was a poky cabin in which they fell over each other, and another pod, reached through a diaphragm, where they slept strapped to the walls. This pod could be booked by a scrap-pad notice pinned to the soft rubbery doorway. If anyone lost the safety pin it caused great resentment. There was no gravity. A small object, once mislaid, could get absolutely anywhere.

They said that being on board reminded them, variously, of the mouse cages in New Kyoto, of life on a non-violent ward, of hanging round a soup-kitchen. These were the lives they knew, none other. Cheops overcame the problem of interstellar distance by constantly disintegrating and reintegrating itself: slipping

in a flux of particles from one strand of galactic spaghetti to another. Extraordinary techniques had to be used to prepare human beings for this performance, and it had emerged that a history of mild mental illness was the best primary indicator in selecting candidates for the new frontier. Further screening had identified the ideal minds, all of them with the same slightly abnormal brain chemistry: Dr Irwin, Professor Shaw, Dr Nanazetta, Dr Ohba, Dr Mihalaska.

The scientific qualifications were required for public relations, just as long ago the men who would sit strapped helplessly in primitive projectile capsules had had to be career test pilots. In fact Sugi had no engineering to do. Irwin could add little to the computers' analysis of climate, and Sasha the anthropologist expected no field work. Even Nanazetta the physiologist was not regarded by anyone as the ship's doctor.

Merle was the captain: but her title was as irrelevant as the others. The group was supposed to operate on consensual decision-making.

The five didn't like each other, but that was no special problem. They were all accustomed to having poor social lives. Invitations to the sleeping pod were arrived at in roundabout ways. Irwin was frequently employed as a go-between, because he was thought to have a friendly smile—if you could catch him between bouts of sour depression. Sasha was celibate: Nanazetta took this personally and nagged her about it. He bitched at Irwin too, because he was black and therefore (by Nanazetta's reckoning) had always been sneakily favoured by the team back on Earth. Merle's promptly announced and executed programme of trying anyone available was designed to save her from rejection on a more personal level, which it did. It didn't save her from general resentment. She guessed before long that she's been appointed "captain" because of, not in spite of, her somewhat abrasive personality. Captain equals scapegoat. The only person who still tried to be friendly to her was Sugi, and unfortunately the cheerful engineer had quickly been relegated to the foot of the pecking order, with the captain naturally pecking harder than anyone.

The days they spent in Cheops had the same hours as days on Earth and moved in the same way, aimlessly and uncomfortably. Alarm call, get up, have breakfast, go to work, don't go to work, argue, have coffee. But the nights were long. When Merle lay in her bodybag, arms drifting above her face, she remembered strangely every bedtime of her past when she had longed for just what she was given now: night

unfathomable. Not terrifying extinction but sleep. Sleep for a hundred years, sleep without dreams.

They were eating lunch when Cheops made its first landfall after the red smog system. In the earlier stages of the adventure they would have been excited, but now, when their morning came — as Cheops came out of the flux within the system of a planet-bearing star — they went about their business as if nothing was happening.

The designers of the Cheops project had set a high value on crew morale, which they knew was bound to be shaky. Everybody was provided with exactly what they most liked to eat, which made mealtimes interesting in an appalling sort of way. Irwin ate nothing but organically grown haricot beans and fresh tomatoes, baked in olive oil and scattered liberally with chopped raw garlic and Bombay onion. Nanazetta preferred huge chunks of practically raw meat, and had never troubled to learn to chew with his mouth closed. Sugi sucked vegetable soup out of a spouted beaker. There were hideous sound effects as she hauled up the tasty glutinous fragments that settled on the bottom.

Merle was on the fourth "day" of a fast, and she was worrying Sasha.

"You must eat, Merle. We must behave normally. For everybody's sake —"

She herself was eating carrot cake with sour cream: her tongue collecting delicious crumbs and smears from around her mouth. After a lifetime of guilty obesity she was free at last, she didn't have to care anymore. It was wonderful.

"It's a protest," said Merle. "If you don't leave me alone I'll refuse to use the toilet next. And see how you like that, in here, comrade."

"Arrogant bitch," muttered Nanazetta.

Cheops tactfully offered a diversion. They had landed.

Lunch was abandoned. The ship's lander, in which the crew environment was embedded, had allowed them no sense of descent or impact. Only the screens now told them that they were planetside; and that exploration was possible.

They stood in the lock, five glimmering figures packed close together. It opened, and the new world rushed in. A dozen or so smaller Cheops remotes jumped out and scurried away like active little silver lobsters.

"Jib-booms and bobstays," said Merle. "Shiver my timbers. I can't believe it."

They appeared to have landed on a golf-course. A serene, well-tended golf-course, the rolling greens broken up by patches of flowering shrubbery.

It was Irwin's turn to name the planet. He decided to call it Ma'at, after the cosmic principle of harmony worshipped as a goddess by the Ancient Egyptians. He explained this in a rush of exuberance. He wanted to honour the race of the Pharaohs now, at the moment when the project was finally justified, for their inspiration, their mystical influence... Merle groaned and rolled her eyes. Irwin's mood swings bored her: and yet there was an awful temptation to provoke them.

"I heard it was called Cheops because there's never been a more stupid waste of more money and brains since the pyramids."

But everybody approved of Ma'at, nonetheless. Five gleaming dolls spread out: first stepping carefully, then walking, then skipping, running, prancing. After the Cheops — not to speak of their lives on Earth — this green paradise went to their heads like champagne. They ran around the bushes, laughing. Sugi picked flowers.

Sasha knelt and touched the turf. It was really a close-matted creeper with tiny violet flowers. She wondered, could the machinery be programmed to tell her what this would feel like to bare human hands?

The Ma'atians arrived quietly. There were about fifteen of them. They came out of the trees on the edge of the glade where the lander stood, and stared. They were terracotta coloured, humanoid, rather tall and slim. They wore few clothes. There were no signs of humanlike secondary sexual characteristics.

The Earthlings were transfixed, embarrassed at having been caught skipping about like children. The silvery Sugi doll hid its flowers behind its back, and all five Earthlings heard her nervous giggle.

"They can see us!" cried Sasha, confused.

"Of course they can see the suits," snapped Merle. "Contact! We aren't equipped for this."

Captain and crew retreated, precipitately, back into the ship.

"What are we going to do?" said Sugi. "Make love, not war?"

"Will they be able to hear us? Will Cheops give us voices out there? We hear ourselves but that's different, isn't it? That's like the carrot cake —"

The others, even Merle, ignored Nanazetta's faux pas.

Irwin was shaking visibly — head to toe hysterical tremors. "It always gets me like this," he kept muttering. "New people. Strangers..."

Merle laughed. "We're not going to do anything. Cheops is God. Cheops will let us know what the rules are. Come on, ye lily-livered scum. Out there and enjoy yourselves. Captain's orders."

The Ma'atians were still there. Some terracotta figures were examining the landing site, as if planning to present a bill for damages. Luckily it had been a soft touchdown.

Other Ma'atians sat on the violet flowered turf. They seemed completely, eerily unsurprised. The five heard whistling and clicking sounds, and saw teeth like white needles.

Sasha spread her gleaming arms.

"We come in peace —"

Nanazetta was following the site inspectors, making menacing gestures.

Whistling and clicking: it sounded articulate, modulated. She believed it was language.

"We come from another world. Do you know what that means? We're on a voyage of exploration."

One of the Ma'atians came close and looked Sasha up and down. It (she? he?) gestured in an uncannily graphic manner at her, at the tiny lander.

That's a very small ship, it "said." It peered around and waved its arms. Where's the rest of the expedition?

"There are only five of us," she explained. "We're the crew of an experimental probe. We're quite harmless."

(And at that moment knew this was a lie —)

Another Ma'atian came up to Merle. It waved its hand across her gleaming breast, across its own body and announced (it seemed) something important.

"And my name's Merle," said the captain affably. "Merle Candida. My mother didn't like me, she named me after a disease. I'm the captain here. You'd better take me to your leader."

The star of Ma'at was smaller and more brilliant in appearance than the star of Earth. It was descending in the sky, clear diamond white as Venus, as the explorers were led into the native settlement. The Ma'atians houses were scattered, with green plots between them. They had dark brown walls and white or red tiled roofs with turned up eaves. The party with the Cheops expedition shrilled and clattered: soon a collection of smaller, plumper terracottas had gathered, popping out of the little houses or jumping up from among the greenery. The plump ones were wrapped in garments. They seemed less phlegmatic than the first group. There were shrill cries: somebody, Sasha saw, seemed to faint or collapse. There was a lot of urgent whistling, waving and even physical grappling between the two groups.

"These must be the women," decided Irwin, a smirk in his voice. "Typical feminine behaviour." He said it solely to annoy Merle. But Sasha answered thoughtfully.

"Wait until I see them dance —"

"Dance? Why should they dance?"

That was Sugi.

"They will."

Five of the plump terracottas finally came forward. They raised their arms face high, forearms crossed. They made expansive gestures.

Our home is your home. Please, accept our hospitality.

Later, after more gestural conversation and quantities of whistling, there was a banquet. It was served on patios of beaten earth outside the little houses. The Ma'atians did not appear to have developed any communal or ceremonial buildings: their welcoming feast was a street party. The tall slim ones ran to and fro between the houses with bowls of hot porridgy food, flat dishes laden with what seemed to be flowers, bundles of creeper stems, oblate double-spouted pitchers of liquid. The household that had been awarded the honour, or terror, of entertaining the strangers did not seem surprised to find that their guests could not or would not eat. Heaped dishes were brought to them, presented and removed without rancour.

Then the Ma'atians danced. They danced separately, and in small groups. They tumbled down the housesteps and danced neighbour to neighbour along the little alleys between their gardens. There were no musical instruments. They sang and clapped, without losing breath, to give each other the time. They danced how happy they were to be alive, and what a beautiful day it had been. They danced a little fear — not much — and a good deal of amazement. They danced wisdom and serenity, mischief and sex (these last were chiefly handled by the taller group).

Sugi turned to the anthropologist, mystified. "Hey, Sasha. How did you know?"

Illustrations by Jonathan Colclough



"Well, comrade?" inquired Irwin. "Which is which?"

"I don't know," she mumbled, and felt herself hunching up in the suit: trying defensively as always to hide her horrible folds of flesh. "I don't know. I haven't a clue."

Nanazetta was muttering: "Watch out. Watch out. This could turn sour at any moment."

Sugi chortled "Oh shut up you old misery," and thumped him playfully.

The captain tried not to look at anyone, especially not the watchful Sasha. Her throat was swollen and her eyes were stinging. She felt humiliated. It was the sunset light – the Venus sun now vanishing in a haze of gold, the flowers whose scent she would never know. It was the comfort and joy out there, out of reach. These things were getting to her as if she were maudlin drunk.

Two plump Ma'atians came over. They indicated, quite clearly, that it was Earth's turn to perform. Sorry, but no thanks, indicated the Cheops crew.

Oh, but you must.

Sorry.

The plump Ma'atians were consternated. This failure seemed to worry them far more than the strangers' weird appearance, or their refusal of food and drink. Maybe they're not human after all! – they whistled to each other.

And they were right, of course.

"Well come on, why not?" Sugi was ready. "Let's get down."

"No!" snarled the captain.

"We can't dance," she told the Ma'atian's, in English, forgetting to gesture. "We don't dance. Not since we joined this expedition. We'll never dance any more."

The Ma'atians put up their crossed forearms, repeatedly: they made soothing gestures, apologetic at having run heedlessly into an alien taboo.

"We want to go back to our ship!" shouted Merle. They understood that, too.

Cheops had found exactly what it was looking for. It settled down in orbit to count over the treasure. Its landing party, meanwhile, behaved according to profile. Sugi was having a lovely holiday. She didn't even have to eat the funny food. She made no attempt to try and find the limits of what Cheops allowed: in fact she rarely moved more than fifty metres from the lander, except when she joined organized excursions into town. She seemed to Merle to be constantly looking, on her little walks around the golf course, for a sign directing her to the beach.

Nanazetta watched out for trouble.

Sasha Mihalavská and Bob Irwin made notes. They established that the Ma'atians in this village had no meat or dairy animals. They observed what appeared to be several species of flying lizards (they flew like bats) and many things that looked like brightly coloured giant millipedes. These seemed to be the only large fauna around. The vegetation suggested an equable warm temperate climate; wind direction was steady and gentle. Bob deduced – perhaps prematurely – that the Cheops had landed on an island. Sasha was not so sure. There were convincing indications, in the variety of artefacts and implements, that

the Ma'atians belonged to a large and sophisticated cultural group. If this was an island it was a big one. There ought to be towns, maybe cities, and yet they must be some distance away. No other natives had come to or left the village since Cheops landed.

In the crew environment they typed up their notes, under Merle's sardonic eyes.

The question of Ma'atian gender was not cleared up for many days, not until they'd evolved some quite sophisticated gestural communication. The answer explained the odd calm of their first encounter. Ma'atians were not well endowed with secondary sexual characteristics. Their apparent dimorphism was a matter of age. It seemed that their vertebrae settled together and major bones became more dense and shorter at maturity: the tall slender ones were children.

They were very like human beings. If there were ever humans, that is, who lived in such perfect contentment.

"What happens to you when you die?"

Sasha and Bob had found an older Ma'atian, an "old lady" they called her, who was willing to be their confidante. Her social role was not clear but she seemed unafraid of the strangers and accustomed to impart and receive knowledge. It bothered Sasha that she still was not sure whether her voice could be heard "out there" as it sounded inside her suit. Self-consciously, she mimed death.

We go to another place, answered the old woman.

"What's it like, this other place?" asked Bob. He was becoming very adept with his dumb shows.

The old lady thought for a moment, then made the sweeping, distancing gesture.

"Schoo... Schoo... Icchi... Icchi..."

She thought again, and started away, beckoning.

"She's taking us to paradise," crowed Bob Irwin, sotto voce.

Not to heaven but to a blue lake, unsuspected before, beyond the terraced houses and gardens. It was the first body of water they had seen. The old woman crouched down. She smiled (needle teeth, the same modified snarl) and swept an arm over the water.

"Water burial?"

"No." Sasha knew how much room there was for misapprehension: and yet what was there to trust in a situation like this, if not intuition? Understanding thrilled her... "I know what she means. She means the reflection. Heaven is like here. Heaven is just the same as being alive."

Someone laughed. A shiny doll stalked across the turf: Merle had been following them. She knelt by the pool and flicked her silver, stylized hand into the surface. Loveliness vanished in a welter of bobbing ripples.

"You can look, but you'd better not touch."

Merle laughed again inside their helmets, and the doll walked away.

"I'm getting very worried about the captain," said Sasha.

Merle picked a fight with Bob Irwin. She was envious of the new friendship of course, and it had to be Bob she attacked because she was a little afraid of Sasha. Bob made some joking remark about the Ma'atians getting the impression

that Earth was a female-ordered society, and she was onto him immediately.

He defended himself: "Well, you are the captain. And you girls outnumber us boys. That's all I meant—"

"And why do you think that is, Bob?"

"I don't know—"

"Could it be statistical? Could it be there are so many more 'mad' women scientists available, that with the worst will in the world this transgalactic political advertisement had to have a female majority? In fact, over all, Bob, I think you'd find there are far more 'mad' women about of any persuasion. Able to walk and talk and keep themselves clean, that is. Men have to be doubly incontinent before anyone declares them unemployable or locks them up—"

"Quiet down!" yelled Nanazetta, banging his dinner tray on a bulkhead. It was mealtime again, of course.

Shards of mashed potato and bloody beef sailed through the air and landed — splat — because they were not in space now and they all knew it.

"I'm watching you, Captain Shaw. You're trying to screw us up. You're bad for our morale, Captain. And I'm going to report that, when we get home."

"You stupid bastard. None of us is ever going home."

"Yes we are, Merle," Bob broke in quickly (he wished he'd never started this). "When the survey's done we're going right back to where and when we started from, we're going to get debriefed out of the project and go on with our normal lives.

"Only richer—" he added heartily, and Sugi cheered.

Merle seemed to grow calm. Perhaps she even realized she'd gone too far. She smiled a little and nodded.

"Mmmh, yeah. Okay." She sighed innocently. "You know, Bob. I've thought of a better name for this place. You ought to call it Duat, not Ma'at. I'm sure you remember. That was the Ancient Egyptian word for heaven."

Bob and Sasha and Sugi, all began to smile.

"You know, the place where the dead people go."

They stopped smiling.

The captain snickered unkindly.

Sasha explored the outskirts of the Ma'atian village, admiring the beautifully tended little patches of subsistence farming. No doubt because of the confusion of that first encounter, she had a persistent impression that the Ma'atiens were not the simple primitives they seemed. But there was no real evidence for this fantasy of an advanced, post-industrial idyll. Not that it mattered. She had to admit, Merle had a right to sneer. She and Bob were just playing. They had no way of knowing even whether their "notes" actually found their way into Cheops' records. Still she couldn't help looking at this place with greed and awe. A new race! It was riches beyond anyone's wildest dreams.

She supposed that must be what the Cheops was thinking too, as it circled around this world. Riches!

It was absurd to feel concern for the Ma'atiens. No doubt the crowded and hungry Earth would be glad to colonize this lovely place. But there was little danger of imminent invasion. Even apart from the ruinous expense, you wouldn't get the most desperate

colonists to accept the terms the crew of the Cheops had accepted: and the alternative (she had a rough idea of the notional realtime/space element of their voyage so far) would be a journey of several hundred years.

There was nothing to be done in any case. Sasha, none of them, had any chance of concealing information, of taking any control at all of the mission or their ship. She thought wryly of jeering comments that the first American astronauts had had to endure from their pilot buddies: a monkey's gonna make the first flight. The Cheops crew were less than monkeys. They travelled on the Cheops like fleas on a dog, though a quite irrational proportion of the finance had been devoted to arranging their passage. Human interest stories always help to raise funds. The "experiences" of the crew would be retrieved and reconstructed as marketing videos. But she had no control even of this "suit" in which she walked, though apparently by her own will. It was a remote function of the AI out in space, like the lobster things but less useful.

The development that had made a crewed probe possible was a technique for transferring the whole of a human subjective entity into electro-chemical storage. As pure information then, the passengers could disintegrate and reintegrate without injury: stitching in and out through the vastness of space/time. The process was a genuine transfer, not replication. A brain-dead body remained on Earth, while that which was Sasha felt itself to be here and intact: filling this suit with arms, hands, belly, fingers, like some Kirlian ghost. In a way it did. They had been told that EVA "in" these humanoid shells was important for their survival: an analogue of the endless exercises with which earlier spacefarers had warded off bone death. But where was she in reality? She had been able to accept, just about, the consensual reality which they created inside the lander (very small, for five people, as the Ma'atian child had so naively observed): and been able to stretch that to include their earlier excursions. It was Ma'at that was giving her problems, breaking her up.

None of them knew how anything worked. Cheops was supposed to run a life-support system, giving them anything they needed in the way of perceptual constructs to keep them sane. How far would it go? Sugi Ohba had always cared least — or at any rate seemed to think least — about their existential predicament. Since the landing on Ma'at she'd been behaving exactly as if her suit actually contained her body. She picked flowers! What did the AI out in orbit make of that?

Sasha felt the vertigo which they had been warned to avoid. Like Orpheus they must not look at what they were doing, or it would vanish... She trembled (and that seemed real). She had accepted the bargain willingly, embracing a heroic destiny as they said on her country's television. She had felt that she hardly deserved all the approval: after all, she didn't have a lot to lose.

Sasha chewed miserably on her non-existent lip.

To dance. To touch someone's hand... To touch even a leaf or a flower...

They must keep the consensus going. That was why Merle's cynicism was as dangerous as Sugi's thoughtlessness. It was true that sexual equality still had to be

achieved, especially in the former "western" nations. It was true that all had hard-luck stories. But life is always better than death.

Beyond the farm patches forested hills began, but there was a well trodden path. A plump terracotta figure was watching her, leaning on a kind of hoe in one of the last vegetable gardens.

"Is there another village?"

Sasha pointed down the path and sketched roofs in the air. The woman (close up you could tell from the clothes) left her hoe and came over. She gestured, and whistled "Schooo."

Sasha and Bob had decided that word meant something like "far." They were compiling a tentative glossary.

The woman looked her dead in the eye (another shared cultural gesture, like the concept of heaven). She crouched, and drew in the dirt. Houses: a little cluster of turned up roofs. "Schoo, schoo —" Down the path...several strides. Another tiny sketch of roofs. The scale was clear.

"Heesh! Heesh!"

The woman jerked her hands in the affirmative sign, and again looked at the invader straight: firmly, undeniably intelligible. We like it that way, she said. We like to be friendly, but we like people to keep their distance.

Sugi was by the lander, looking lost. She was waiting for a mealtime, guessed Sasha. Sugi could not snack; she had lost the ability in institutional years.

"These people are so nice," she burst out. "You know the boys who come and hang around the ship?"

Those were girls and boys, but Sugi didn't understand that.

"They were here earlier. And the one I call Charlie, he sort of asked me — clear as words — : Why don't you stay with us forever?"

They entered the lander. As usual Sasha's consciousness ellided the transition: the two of them were in the crew environment, in their shipboard clothes. The idiot woman beamed and sighed. She was having a holiday romance now.

"Isn't that lovely. D'you think he means it?"

Sasha wished that someone else was here.

"He means it. They don't want any of us to get back to Earth."

"Why not?"

"Are you kidding? Because they're not stupid, you idiot. Not stupid at all."

Sugi took fright and retired into the sleeping pod. Sasha felt a desire to eat (for reassurance), but no appetite — the phantom itch of an amputated limb. That was a danger sign. She thought about the five of them, lying back on Earth like so many Walt Disneys in their glass coffins: and with just about as much chance (let's face it) of successful resurrection. She could imagine the Cheops team agreeing among themselves. We'll find ways round the problem eventually. But so it goes. You can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. She had sometimes thought the "special brain chemistry" was a myth, invented as compensation.

But she still wanted to go home. And the Ma'atians didn't understand. Where is Bob? she wondered in sudden panic. Where is Nanazetta, where is Merle? They don't want us to leave, to go back and report on this choice bit of real estate. They're trying to split us up, they're picking at the weak links.

Merle was alone, most alone. She could have been in Eden before the fall. She had walked into the hills above the settlement. They had closed behind her: now there was nothing, not even a whisper of birdsong or the sound of water. She followed a ridge path, deeper and deeper into a world of green crags and plunging chasms. This is Treasure Island, she said to herself derisively. Presently I will shoot a goat, and dress myself in skins.

Her Kirlian eyes were wide open and very still. An enormous presence watched at her back and looked down at her from the heights. She was afraid, though there was nothing to fear; and finally so afraid that she could go no further. She sat down on a rocky promontory besides her path. This is how it must have been, she thought, to wake up in the world. The first thinking thing, looking at the non-thinking. So much greater than I am. The huge crags looked down at her tiny figure, impassively. She was aware that to endow that green immensity with persona was a reflex of fear: fear of what it really was. Slowly, slowly, she let the fallacy slip away. And fell into unknowing...

After a while, she got up and stripped off the suit. She was naked under it. She stood examining her body, wondering if she would know it among a hundred other bodies of tallish, dark haired white women — apart from the all-too-familiar face. She thought not. The small white sun was warm. She could feel it, she could see the shadow it gave her.

A Ma'atian child appeared, coming down the path. On seeing her naked it beamed all over its face and sat down on the edge of the promontory.

"Hello," said Merle cautiously.

She knew this was an adolescent female, from the patterns on the tiny kilt slung around its slender hips. If you didn't look too closely it made a pretty young woman, in spite of the fishlike needle teeth.

You have taken your clothes off, remarked the girl, in gesture and whistle-clicking. We didn't think you could do that. We thought you were maybe ghosts.

She touched the shed carapace curiously.

Merle laughed.

"What a silly idea."

Perhaps the laugh seemed like an invitation. The child settled more closely on the rocky perch, and took Merle's thick white hand. I like you very much, she pantomimed. Why don't you stay with us? Don't go away in that little box. I wish you would stay.

The pretty girl seemed sweetly sincere: however, Merle understood at once that she was being tempted, and why. She started to giggle. It was so ludicrous. Make love, not war: Sugi had said that. Which was typical of Sugi, the good-hearted simpleton. Sugi was probably the only one of them all, villagers and invaders, who didn't know this paradise was doomed. The natives had not way of guessing their world had five hundred years' grace, at a conservative estimate. But Merle was not about to try and explain that. Let them sweat. After all, technology does make giant strides sometimes. They could be right to be scared for their own skins.

"Why should I want to stay with you?" she snarled, abruptly losing her temper. "You made me suffer. Just when I thought it was all over, damn you. You made me feel things I thought I was safe from forever. You want to know the truth? We're not explorers, we're a

bunch of escaped maniacs. And the rest of the asylum's coming right after us."

The child was not affected by human rage. Emboldened by the lengthy speech she moved even closer, grinning.

We call you the people who wrap up their farts, she confided. It must get very smelly inside your boxes.

The mime was clever and ridiculous. Merle snorted. They laughed together, uproariously.

Merle wiped her eyes: looked down at herself, looked at the alien girl: in sudden, belated, heart-catching wonder...

Sasha was still in the crew environment, panicking and wishing she could make herself feel hungry, when Merle joined her. She began checking over Cheops' present status on the information screens. She was obviously in a foul mood.

She glared at Sasha and asked abruptly: "Have you been having hallucinations?"

Sasha was alarmed.

"Have you?"

Merle just scowled.

"Where's Sugi?"

"She's sleeping."

Merle groped around in the wall niches. She located the worn piece of scrap paper, and after some rummaging the safety pin. She pinned the booking notice on the sleeping pod diaphragm. She seemed to be daring Sasha to comment. As she was about to disappear, she looked around briefly.

"Cowardice and stupidity," she said in a bored tone. "Are the mainsprings of your existence. And mine. Do you know why they picked us for Cheops? Because we're too stupid to kill ourselves, and too scared to do anything else."

Sasha went up to the lake, feeling safer now that both of her weak links were accounted for. She was thinking wistfully that Cheops was bound to call an end to shore leave soon. A shiny doll came running up. She was afraid it was Sugi or Merle, turned violent. But it was Bob Irwin.

"Where's the captain?" he yelled.

"She's in the sleeping pod with Sugi."

"Oh, shit. We've got to do something. Nanazetta's jumped ship."

"What?"

"He has! He has! I found his suit. He dumped his suit —"

Sasha jumped to her feet. "They've got the Do Not Disturb sign up," she wailed.

The token was so sacred that even in this crisis they didn't know what to do.

"Fuck it," decided Bob. "We'll go after him ourselves."

"Go after him?" Sasha was bewildered. "But he's. I mean, if he's not in the suit?"

"Sash, either I'm going crazy or...Come and see."

The suit was where Bob had found it, stowed in some composting vegetation at the bottom of a Ma'atian garden. The footprints led away: distinctly human, nothing at all like the slender tracks of the natives. The Ma'atians agreed that the fifth stranger had gone away. They even agreed, reluctantly,



jonathan coelcough

to show his friends where he was.

Nanazetta had covered a surprising amount of ground: when Bob and Sasha discussed it they couldn't remember when they had last seen him. He could have been gone for days, and their "reality" might have just closed over the gap. They lay in their shiny suits under unknown stars beside the two adult Ma'atians who were leading them. Neither of them managed to sleep.

In the morning they found him. They had been following a rocky valley which dwarfed the tiny stream buried in its midst. Ahead, the country was beginning to open out. They could see that this was no island. The green crags were the foothills of a great mountain chain, which loomed up against the lemon-coloured dawn sky.

"Awesome —" breathed Irwin.

And there was Nanazetta. The Ma'atians gestured upwards, and Sasha saw the physiologist's big burly pink body. He was watching from a grassy cove, a natural step cut half way up the valley wall. The figure bobbed out of sight.

"He's up there!" cried Bob. "Let's get the bugger!"

The Ma'atians stayed below. Bob and Sasha climbed. In the cove, an extraordinary sight met their eyes. Somebody had started building a hut. There were Ma'atian artefacts strewn around, and on a flat rock someone had been mixing brown clay with water to plaster the stake and creeper walls. A Ma'atian boy squatted beside this rock, his arms wrapped around his knees. To Sasha he looked proud and frightened, and a little guilty. She guessed at the desperate plotting: the urgent deliberations of a society not given to violence trying to invent stratagems for survival against the odds. It was a world of affection and comfort: they had no other weapons.

While Sasha saw this Bob Irwin was catapulted back to Earth by bewilderment. He saw the boy as a youngster of his own race, and was appalled.

"You can't mean to live with him!" he cried. "You're ruining your life, kid. The man's a horror story. He eats red meat!"

He remembered the glossary, and tried whistling and clicking: hoped he was saying something... "Don't stay with bad stranger. Your people better. Go home!"

The boy whistled and clicked too: it sounded almost the same.

"Hey! Leave the kid alone!"

Nanazetta came running out from behind the half-built hut, brandishing a knobbled tree root.

Bob and Sasha grabbed at each other clumsily.

"Okay, Nanazetta," quavered Bob. "Party's over—"

"Don't waste your breath. I like it here. I've got myself a girl, the food's good. When you get back, you can report me missing."

"That's a boy, Nanazetta," Irwin told him, exasperated. "We can tell by the kilt."

The physiologist flushed darkly, colour spreading down his chest through the thick mat of hair. He was wearing a Ma'atian kilt too.

"What business is it of yours? Get off my patch!"

"For God's sake Nanazetta. You aren't really here. None of us are really here. You don't exist at the moment, except as an array of — of psychic dots and dashes, or whatever it is, in Cheops' memory. You

can't have forgotten that."

He had never accepted it, not deep down. That was his secret. He could not take seriously any theory of the human entity as something that could exist separated from the body. Nanazetta believed in flesh and blood. He hefted his twisted root, smiling contemptuously. He knew who was crazy.

"Nanazetta!" cried Sasha. "You're betraying your planet. I don't know what you've done, but you mustn't do it. We are all of us part of the Cheops. You're going to wreck the whole project —"

"So why should I care? Did anyone care what would happen to me, stuck in a cryogenic vault while my 'Kilrian structure' was off shooting round the galaxy? Piss on them. Piss on the Sahel, piss on the Boers, piss on the teeming masses everywhere. This is my promised land. I'm staying."

"Oh, Bob, this is crazy. This is just another shared hallucination. He can't have escaped. He's still part of the Cheops, and he'll be back in the crew environment at take-off with the rest of us. He can't help it."

Nanazetta's fury boiled over. He charged across the cove. Sasha and the boy clung to each other this time; Bob tried to run.

"Get off! Get the fuck off!" gasped the big man hoarsely, flailing with his root. Bob scuttled, dodged. Nanazetta went flying past him, still yelling furiously, over the edge of the shelf.

He landed with a crunch, out of their sight below.

"Oh, God —"

Down by the side of the stream the two adult Ma'atians were bending over something fleshly, solid and still. Nanazetta had broken his neck. He was dead.

The boy brought a kind of digging stick down from above and all five of them took turns at the work. They buried him where he lay. The Ma'atians seemed to think this was the right thing to do, and Bob and Sasha were in no state to argue.

On the journey back they camped when darkness fell, as before. In the middle of the night Sasha jerked awake. She shook Irwin violently.

"Bob! We shouldn't have buried him! The contamination! All kinds of bacteria — viruses. We'll have to go back and dig him up and burn him..."

Bob waited until her babbling ended in silence. Each of them, in Ma'at's radiant starlight, bright as a full moon on Earth, stared at a metallic doll.

"Was there a body?" asked Sasha at last. "Do you think we're imagining all this?"

"I don't know. But no body left Earth, Sasha."

"Oh, good. So no Earth bacteria can be contaminating Ma'at."

Slowly, Bob removed his suit. Sasha did the same. Bob dug his bare hands into the dark soil and looked at them. There was dirt under his fingernails. He could feel the grit on his palms.

"This is impossible," whispered Sasha.

They put the suits back on.

Sugi was waiting for them at the settlement. She didn't seem to take in the news of Nanazetta's death. She had worries of her own.

"I don't know what it is, Bob, but I can't seem to get into the lander. I must have locked myself out."

She was confused, showing the pathetic wariness which they remembered from the first day of Cheops,

before she got to trust them.

The Cheops lander looked the same as always, a glassy tetrahedron that turned from black to silver as the light struck it. It stood in the centre of the glade, under the clear blue sky: a large packing case that would open when triggered by Cheops, just big enough to fold in all the AI's mobile exploratory hardware. Including five servo-units converted from human pressure suits.

"It's bigger inside, isn't it?" suggested Sugi uneasily. "Only, I can't get in any more."

It was cooler that night. Sasha and Bob sat on the porch of the house that had been lent to them and watched fireflies. They had taken off their suits again and were wearing borrowed Ma'atian garments, the light swathing folds making a comfortable cloud of Sasha's gentle bulk. Sugi, surprisingly, had made a swift and complete recovery. She was down in the settlement somewhere with her holiday friends. Faintly, the marooned explorers caught strains of the Earthling dance track which had been top of the charts when Cheops departed.

Merle was gone. They had searched for her, they had asked the Ma'atians. But all that anyone would do was to point to the hills. She went that way. Schoo... Schooo. She has gone far.

"Should we go after her?" wondered Sasha.

Bob shook his head. In the quiet of this night he could think of the captain with apology. They had all picked on her, and it wasn't fair. It was only the nature of the born solitary, forced to live always in a crowd, that had made her so abrasive. But he could do without her angry, restless presence.

"No, let her be. Let her find her own promised land."

On Earth the development team would be waiting for the ship's return. The Cheops had winked out of existence slightly beyond the orbit of the Moon and at once passed from all human contact, all knowledge. Its return was supposed to be to the same location, a year downstream in time. There was no real reason for the "safety" period. But even the designers of the probe still found themselves unable to accept completely that time could now be treated as a landscape.

Meanwhile here, on Ma'at...

The fireflies were luminous spots on the tails of little night-hunting lizards. But they danced just the same.

"Look."

Bob pulled something out from under their doorstep. It was one of the lobsterlike remotes: stiff and dead.

"I found it in the street. What happened, Sasha? Don't worry, I know we're stranded, I'm not going to get hysterical about that. But I simply don't understand—"

"I suppose – well, Nanazetta broke free: but I think we all... We found out how good life can be, and didn't want to be ghosts anymore. The probe, the Cheops AI, started off with the directive to preserve our sanity by giving us what we wanted – immaterially. But I think five hungry human minds influenced it more than the team at home reckoned for. In the end that directive had become its vital task. And there was the flux principle. I mean, the process of break-

down and build-up was there, and we unconsciously activated it – with a different orientation. Instead of remaking itself somewhere/when else, Cheops made itself into something else. What are bodies after all: carbon, hydrogen, oxygen...? It had all the information. That's my theory, anyway."

"But it doesn't work out, Sash. Nothing comes from nothing. Look – this er, lobster's still here. And the lander, and all our suits. It can't have made us out of Ma'atian materials. How could it affect them? That's crazy."

"No, Bob. You're not thinking straight. I said the Cheops converted itself, didn't you hear me?"

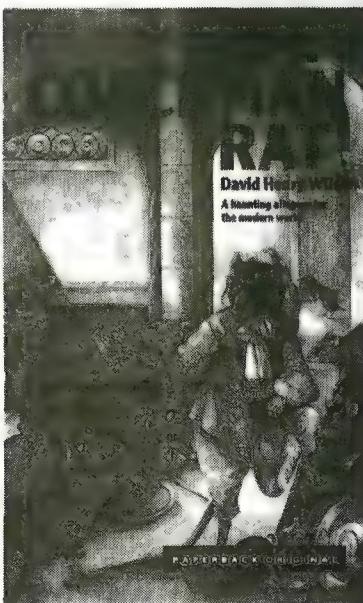
"Meaning what?"

"Watch the sky, Bob."

The shore party had often watched the Ma'atian sky at this time. Together, and briefly more or less at peace, they had waved and cheered as little Cheops tracked by overhead. The Ma'atian night was the same: moonless, ablaze with jewels. Maybe the good ship Cheops had gone home alone. But Sasha didn't think so. Five solid human bodies had to come from somewhere. She heaved a sigh. Her conscience pricked her a little: but she could not seriously regret the way things had turned out.

Tonight, all the stars stood still.

Gwyneth Jones contributed the article "Sex Change Operation Shock" to Interzone 16, and an interview with her appeared in our issue 19. A resident of Brighton, she is known for her sf novels *Divine Endurance*, *Escape Plans* and *Kairos* (all published by Unwin Hyman).



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C.J. Cherryh

Interview by Stan Nicholls

It's a minor but intriguing point. Why did C.J. Cherryh add an h to the end of her name? "Cherry is a fairly uncommon name in the States," she explains. "The fear was that I would be crossed with a romance writer, and the publishers thought the books might be racked in the wrong place; although I don't see how they could possibly mistake my titles. But that's marketing for you. There were a number of suggestions, including going back to older versions, or family names. Finally I gave up, ran over some spelling changes, and decided to tack an h on the end. It was the most innocuous thing I could do."

She began writing when she was ten, and got her first rejection slip at fourteen. She kept plugging away until, tired of being rejected, she decided to do a little market research: "Which editors were buying the books I most liked to read, and what was I doing that was different from people who were selling?"

Then she set about developing her writing skills. "I took one of Fritz Leiber's Fafhrd stories and studied it. Fritz is so good; he gets information at you in a very clever, subtle way. You can't even see his hands move. I admire that sense of pacing and skill he has in delivering information without pain or paragraphs that are purely explanatory. I began working on clearing the underbrush out of my work, and realized, for economy, that one has to make a scene do three things. Not any specific three things, just three things. If something does not advance the plot, give information, or provide an insight into characterization, it doesn't need to be there. I concentrated on matters of compactness, and attempted to keep sentences simple, so that when I needed to get complicated I had the room to do it.

"One of the most difficult things in reading certain writers' work is wading through relentlessly, meticulously grammatical sentence structures that are loaded with small phrases, most of which are superfluous," she contends. "This kind of writing I don't like to do. So I took my lessons in clearing out the dead wood and, most of all, in getting control of the plot, getting a sure sense of what certain scenes are doing, and why they are doing it. There is a point

in a book in which you present certain kinds of information. One of the overwhelming temptations is to load everything into the first three chapters. But you don't need to explain, for instance, the intricacies of your created world's economic system right there, unless you have a scene that's going to need it. You can save that for later. You could even introduce it in a small scene involving the exchange of money, and tweak the reader's curiosity."

She soon discovered parallels between the writing process and her then main occupation, teaching. "To teach anyone you have to make them believe they want the information. The student who pops up and says, 'Why?' is not being impertinent. 'What are you doing that for?' is a very good question.

"I think you have to signal the reader, fairly, that there's going to be an interesting point raised. You signal them by putting in a tiny wisp that hints at a strangeness, and they're alerted for it when it comes along. If you always remember you are writing to a reader, and attempt to raise questions and provide answers, they tend to approach things in good order. Other things you wish to obscure, so you slip them in very quietly, and like any good magician raise such a storm thereafter that readers forget all about the gun on the table."

Having worked on technique and assessed the market, she sent a book off to a publisher — she prefers not to say who — and after six months hadn't heard a thing. How did she deal with that? "Well, I pity anyone who knew the ropes as little as I did," she confesses. "Eventually I diffidently wrote and said, 'Excuse me, sirs, but is there any chance of you having read this?' They'd lost it. I typed another copy, did a revision, and told them to ignore the first one if they found it. Months went by with no answer. I wrote again. They'd lost the new version too. I provided them with a third." At this point she attempted to get an agent, and ran into a situation familiar to aspiring authors. "It's the old Catch-22: you can never get an agent unless you're published, and when you most need one, you can't have one. At any rate, I didn't know what kind of situ-

ation I'd gotten myself into. Was I obliged to wait on this bunch to locate my missing manuscripts, or what? So, not wishing to make anyone angry, I wrote another book — or rather cleaned-up an old one — and sent it off to Daw Books."

Don Wollheim expressed interest, but was doubtful about the length. "This was the first personal reply I'd had from an editor besides, 'I'm sorry, we've lost your manuscript.' So I thought, 'Good grief, there's a live one out there!' I gave up sleep and eating and, while working a full-time teaching job, wrote *The Gate of Ivrel* in two months. Don said, have you got another one? And I said, well, I've got one tied-up in this silly situation. He asked to see it — it happened to be *Hunter of Worlds* — and ended up buying both of them."

C.J. Cherryh was not an sf enthusiast — in fact she wasn't even aware of fandom until after being published, when a group in her native Oklahoma asked her to address them — so how did she come to be writing in the field? "I know the ancient world pretty well; I know the modern world pretty well. I'm a news junkie. I keep the news station on almost all the time I'm working. So it's not that I don't like the modern world, it's just that I've got today down pat, and the future interests me.

"My world is continually expanding before and behind, and to paraphrase Marcus Aurelius, I'm not only a citizen of this century. I'm a great optimist; I believe in the ultimate survival of our species. I look at where we've been, and think, goodness, things are so much better today, and I see nothing in the future that threatens us near as much as what we've already passed through." Including over-population, the threat of nuclear war, pollution...? "Yes. The fact that people are concerned and frightened now is good. If everybody were sitting around contemplating their hands and continuing to pollute without any awareness whatsoever that they are causing a problem I would be worried. Yes, it is high time we did something, but when have we ever done anything different than wait to the last minute to try to solve the problem? Daily life is always more pressing. When you finally convince people they are in imminent

danger they rise up and do something. Fortunately we have gotten excited about the situation early enough."

But are we sufficiently smart, as a species, to sort these problems out? "Have you ever worked an ouija board?" she asks. "You know when you have two people's hands on it it seems to move in directions neither one of you specifically intended? I think populations are that way. Public affairs are that way. If anyone really believes he's in control of humanity, he's never worked an ouija board. People taken individually are maybe brilliant or stupid; as a group, they've done marvellously so far in seeing to their collective survival. By and large we do pretty well at not rushing over the cliff.

"When I graduated from high school, we had a revolutionary picture on the cover of our yearbook. It was the first view of earth from space. The first concept of our planet as a unified entity. And, as people have observed who've been up there, you can't see the little dotted lines dividing nations. What you see is one beautiful, fragile, interlocked system. I think this particular picture may have ultimately the most impact of any image in this century."

She feels that science fiction, as a form that is involved with the ever-expanding technical world and bringing it where common man can understand it in terms of its impact on people's lives, is the most important literature of our time. "We don't need people to explain our daily lives to us. What we need, in an age in which technology is proliferating faster than the average person has time to absorb it, is interpretation. People may not have the leisure to sit down and think for long, profound periods about what are the implications of, for instance, genetic engineering. There are some people who will accept somebody's opinion completely uncritically and wait to be told what to believe, and what their moral decisions should be. The people who are likely to do something, who would actively like to know about the future, realize they have to depend on somebody with technical expertise and who is willing to put it into a form that can be read. Science fiction is largely concerned with discussing the consequences of the things we're doing. I think it has played an important part already in preparing us to understand the possibilities of space flight. Imagine if no sf had ever been written, and all of a sudden we proposed launching a space programme. How are we going to explain it?"

Arguably there wouldn't have been a space programme if sf hadn't shown the way. "Absolutely. Wasn't it Arthur Clarke who proposed the idea of communications satellites? One of the problems with increasingly complicated

technology is that understanding it, and its implications for people, takes an awful lot of one's time. The working scientist is so immersed in his world he can't take the time to run around and explain his ideas in the simplest possible terms."

She believes interpreting possible scientific developments is part of her remit, but isn't slavish about it. "I don't

into ethical dilemmas posed by the intersection of two sciences, such as computers and genetics. For instance, right now it's possible, by taking gene-typings from a crime scene, to identify an individual as having been present. What happens to the right against self-incrimination? There are legal adjustments, and tremendous controversies, about what is death, and conception



worry at all about occasional oversimplifications, such as partially ignoring real-time distance when two spaceships are communicating. I know the answer, but it's not particularly important that I calculate it out to the nth degree. What I'm trying to do is get the ordinary person to understand that we will be dealing, as we did in the ancient world, with distances over which you cannot readily give instructions. This has dramatic consequences for the story, but it's also part of a mind set that perhaps we thought we had left behind with our blindingly fast communications. But don't forget how it used to be when it was so difficult to get word from one place to another. As it will be again. We will have to resurrect skills of long-distance diplomacy. We will have to give certain government officials the power to make high and wide decisions on a local level, which was an ancient answer to the problem. In other words there will be political accommodations for these kind of distances.

"You can take any given point of technology that we think we understand and carry it on to a larger scale,

and birth. The world is continually changing, the definition of things is altering all the time. We very badly need a literature that can get a sense of perspective about what's going on, and as much about the past as about the future. Because when you examine the past you examine the attitudes people used to hold toward the environment and toward nature."

This begs the question of the observer effect. If our view of the past is determined by the present, and the present is constantly in flux, isn't the picture subject to distortion? "It depends. I write in what I call intense viewpoint. This means I attempt to settle the reader within the skin of an individual character. There are times when I may make a few tucks simply because I'm more interested in communicating the general feeling than in being completely exact. You have to take your readers where you find them, and lead them into this slowly. For example, you take a modern reader who's scared to death of snakes, and you try to put them into the skin of an ancient Greek woman who regards them as sacred,

Photo of C.J. Cherryh by Dick Jude

venerable, wonderful creatures. You've got to realize that your reader may have a touch of squeamishness, and lead them into this gently.

"If I'm writing about ancient Greece, one of the things I like to do for a reader is to get them into the mind set that says the world is alive. This tree is as alive and as important as I am. It and I are part of the same thing. If I destroy it, I am destroying a part of the wholeness to which I belong. This is not a primitive attitude. It is not silly to say even the rocks are alive; it is the literal mindedness of the foreigner to that mind set that says this is impossible. Take a Greek priest making a sacrifice. He kills a bull with an axe in one particular ceremony, then flings the axe into the sea, and rushes away. Why? Because the spirit that has been let loose is so terribly powerful, and he wishes it not to do harm to the worshippers. This is foreign to us. But it's also valuable to understand the meaning within it. Once you arrive at that, once you have lived that lifetime through the book, you come back to our modern age, look at a stream full of beer cans and litter, and you are disgusted. So the ancient attitudes have value to us today."

This sounds very much like pantheism. Does it reflect Cherryh's own view of the world? "I would say that philosophically I'm somewhat of a stoic. I believe that everybody controls their own environment. Nothing happens to you without your consent. Obviously somebody can drop a brick on your head, and that happens without your consent, but insofar as how you view that, how you react, you're in control. No one controls my feelings. I live where I choose to live, and even if I were in a situation where I could not travel, I would still maintain absolute control of my life as far as is physically and politically possible."

"There is also the capacity to read. Not only words, but to read for instance a stream bank. Some people see mud. I see history. I see bands of time; I see traces of what happened there, and what kind of geological processes occurred. The idea that one graduates from school with a diploma in a given subject, and that is the last thing you will ever learn, absolutely guarantees you will approach old age as one of those people you see clinging to a certain style, a certain time, which was for them the last good part of their life. My impulse is to live in such a way that right now is always the best time. I refuse to give up ownership of that."

"I like Aurelius' statement, 'I am a human being, nothing is foreign to me.' Nothing in the entire universe is foreign to me. I don't just live on this planet; I'm already a space traveller because my planet is."

Shortly before this interview took

place an asteroid passed close to the earth ("The disturbing thing is the little blighters sometimes travel in clusters", she says.) But such an event serves only to intensify her passion for space exploration. "When you understand the reason the moon is so pitted is because of the number of such visitors that have hit it, you realize the space programme is a very good idea. Advanced telescopes and all sorts of sensing apparatus in space is a sensible notion. An asteroid impact may have wiped out the dinosaurs; it certainly wouldn't do any good for our civilization either. The resulting chaos would be considerable, and we have always, as a species, lived on that knife edge. How many times must things have passed very close to the earth, and we never knew? This time we were aware. We said, 'Ooh, that was a close one.' I hope next time we have somebody out there who can do something about it. Especially if it's the one that's got our name on it."

Many people who haven't read any science fiction think its main function is prophecy, whereas in fact the track record in this respect is rather poor. Cherryh agrees. "Once upon a time people said computers were going to control our lives and throw us all out of work," she says, "but of course new jobs are now being created by computers." Sf's tendency to portray technology as more likely to enslave than liberate may be erroneous, according to Cherryh. "Writers of the 40s and 50s saw the computer coming, and they had just been through a world war and the rise of Hitler and Stalin, and writers do tend to react to the temperature of their times." Her view is more positive. "When I began writing, it was becoming clear that anybody who thought they were going to control people in the space age was going to have to contend with increased personal mobility and data transmission by satellite, which can get behind any border. I think the prevailing attitude toward oppressive authority in the future will be 'catch me if you can.' As populations increase, control becomes less and less possible."

"Everybody said we would create mega-computers that would be running our lives and spying on us. They reckoned without the ingenuity of the high school student. You look at computers, and because they are mechanical, and right now they are pretty simple, you can begin to figure out what their pattern is. Once you've worked out the pattern you know what the programme is; once you know what the programme is you can put your little finger on the keyboard and be into practically anything. The latter part of this century is working on the proliferation of information. If you can't keep up with the data-flow you can't keep

up in industry, in business, in scientific development... If you're going to have computers, you've got to have people to run them. Once you've put computers into the hands of the people their fingers can walk that keyboard and cause enormous adjustments in the way political systems are run. The networks, the fact that computers can take very condensed information and plug it in somewhere else, means the smuggling of data becomes more probable than some sort of massive control.

"In my own fictional universe," she points out, "I have a kind of paradoxical situation, in which there are two great superpowers, Alliance and Union. If you look at the Alliance, you would say this wildly individualistic confederation of ship captains and station authorities looks as if it would be so chaotic that freedom would be a given. You would think there could never be a tyranny in Alliance. In point of fact one does arise. During a war, at a time when they have to give up a number of liberties, they create a central authority that gives them problems."

"On the other hand, Union, which has vast ranks of cloned citizens who are taught to certain beliefs and values, looks hopelessly oppressive. In fact, the principle behind Union is that you can do whatever you want on your planet just so long as you don't go and bother anyone else with it, and as long as your taxes arrive on time and you get your representative to the central council. The only time Union central government intervenes is if there is a complaint that there is not a fair and equitable system and people are not adequately represented in what they wish to have. The whole thing works smoothly, but any little ripple started at the foundation of such a system could proliferate into some very wild ideas and value conflicts. In attempting to minimize that sort of thing one keeps one's values as general as possible. It turns out that Union actually houses some of the freest spirits, in their own odd way, while Alliance, worried about Union's expansion rate, begins to get very defensive and starts clamping down on people."

Is this intended as political allegory pertinent to our own time? "It's sort of my commentary on modern politics. That the obvious isn't always what happens. Often in history you can think you're on the side of the angels, but when you look at the way your system is working and the amount of freedom it is affording individuals, you may be surprised."

Union sounds like a good working definition of a democracy. "And it has the outward trappings of an absolute dictatorship," she concedes. "What I'm saying is that political systems in the modern world are as complex as

Concluded on page 36

S.M. Baxter

Raft

Reas and Glover padded towards the cable. Plant-like, the cable thrust upwards out of the deck's plates, creaking under the weight of the Raft and all its occupants. A hundred metres up it was tethered to the hub of a tree. The great wooden wheel rotated complacently; Rees was close enough to feel the downwash from its aerodynamically shaped branches.

Around the cable two skitters were dancing out their courtship. The little round creatures fizzed as they flew.

Now the boys were only metres away – and Glover giggled, his wide face flushed with excitement. Rees glared; but the skitters continued their dance, their dim intelligence unable to distinguish the boys' motion from the shadows cast by the falling stars.

Rees grinned and motioned Glover forward. He spread his hands wide. Everything seemed to become vivid: he could count the rivets under his bare feet; he could make out the male shape of the nearest skitter's rotor blades...

Now the male sensed the presence of Rees's gravity well. It darted in alarm. For a few seconds Rees allowed the creature's gravity to work over his palms; it was like the touch of a child. Then, with a stab of regret, he closed his hands and crushed the skitter's substance –

– and the breath was knocked out of him by Glover's bulk thumping into his back.

"You bloody idiot, Glover."

Glover grinned triumphantly: "I got it!" The female's spokes protruded from his fist.

Obscurely disgusted, Rees pushed himself away from Glover's gravitational cling. "Yeah, well, we've only got a few minutes left before Hollerbach comes down this way. Come on – up into the tree –"

Clutching his skitter, Rees led the way up the cable, clambering with hands and feet. After the first dozen metres they'd climbed out of the diffuse gravitational field of the Raft; now their climb was opposed only by the pull of the Core, far below.

Rees reached the tree's hub and made his way along a rotating branch. Air washed over him; he took care to avoid splinters from the branch's leading edge. On reaching the stationary rim he hid himself in the foliage. There was a smell of green, growing things.

Breathing hard, he surveyed his world.

The Raft was an enormous dish that brimmed with life. It was nearly the end of a work shift, and people slid along the avenues to their homes, skirting each others' irritating gravity pull.

Many of them, Rees knew, would be carrying rations from the supply machines that hulked around the rim of the Raft. Others carried tools after a shift spent maintaining the huge old supply devices.

Now a wave of children came rustling to greet the homecoming workers. A party of Officers passed below Rees, their shoulder ribbons sparkling in the shifting starlight.

Rees stood up now, balancing on the tree rim. With his head thrust out of the foliage he could see how the Raft was suspended from a thousand cable-tethered trees. The flying forest was a mass of stately rotation, and it was adorned by a cloud of skitters that caught and softened the starlight.

He craned his neck upwards, eyes raking the sky.

The ruddy air was filled with falling stars, an endless rain of them tumbling down to the Core. Here and there he saw the tiny flashes that marked the end of the stars' year-long lives. Far above him was the



Illustrations by Duncan Fegredo

Vanishing Point: the place the stars fell from. As he stared into the Point he felt as if he were slowly rising; the stars spread out from the Point as if the Raft were climbing a star-walled shaft.

And today there was a new spark right at the Point. A young star, he wondered, poised to fall directly on them?

Relaxing his neck, he let his gaze roam once more over the Raft's scarred bulk. Hidden somewhere beneath, of course, was the mysterious red glow of the Core itself. But the only way to see the Core was through one of the Observation Ports set in the floor of the Raft...

And that reminded him what he was doing here.

He clutched tighter on his skitter. Whenever he'd gone near a Port recently there had been a Scientist waiting to chase him away. Scientists! Fat-bellied fools who acted to a man as if they owned the place... and without a doubt the worst of them all, the one who seemed to take the greatest pleasure in harrassing Rees and his friends, was Hollerbach.

Rees smiled tightly. Well, today old Hollerbach would get what was coming to him –

Right on cue, Hollerbach approached grandly from the rim, the spectacles he affected perched on the end of his nose.

There was a snort from Glover's hideaway. The old Scientist stopped suddenly, his head cocked to one side. Rees felt his pulse quicken. If that fool Glover had messed this up –

But the Scientist seemed to relax. He continued on his way, a slight smile on his lips.

Rees breathed again. He fingered the skitter. He wanted to do this right. He swayed a little, letting the gravitational fields of the Core, the Raft, the tree, play over him like breezes...

Then he launched the skitter into the air. The make-shift missile orbited around the Raft's mass centre and curved downwards –

There was a soft thud. Hollerbach was glaring up, hands on hips, a skitter on the deck beside him. Glover's face popped out of the foliage. "I nearly got him, didn't I?"

"But –" Rees found himself growling with rage. Glover had dropped his skitter straight down. Where was the skill in that? With dismay he watched his own projectile loop to the deck. If not for Glover he would have got Hollerbach right on the bald spot.

"And what do you think you're doing? Officers! Officers!"

Automatically the boys climbed along their branches and slid to the ground. Rees wondered whether apologizing would get him out of this – Hollerbach was only a Scientist, after all...

The party of three Officers who had passed earlier came running. "Mr Hollerbach. I hope you're not hurt –"

Rees recognized the voice and felt sickened. Could they be so unlucky? But it was indeed Captain Smith himself; Rees saw huge arms folded across an officer's belt, and he felt the tug of a belly covered by a ragged shirt. "I know this one. You're Bob Rees's boy. Michael, isn't it?"

Rees nodded, filled with shame.

"Bob's one of my best men. And you've let him down. What were you thinking of? Don't you realize

you could have killed Mr Hollerbach, here?"

"What, with a squashed skitter?" Glover sneered. The Captain cuffed his head; Glover started to cry.

"How old are you two?"

"Twelve," Rees said.

"Twelve, and you don't know yet how important the Scientists are? Without the Scientists we'd all have died off generations ago. It's the Scientists who guide us when we have to move the Raft to avoid falling stars. Did you know that? No?"

"Well, this is obviously a serious matter. Do you propose a punishment, Mr Hollerbach?"

Glover stopped crying. His eyes narrowed. "He made me do it," he said rapidly.

Rees bit his lip.

Hollerbach eyed Glover. "I've no wish to punish the innocent," he said in his thin voice. "Let him go." Glover scampered away.

The Captain scratched his tangle of beard. "You don't believe that, do you?"

Hollerbach didn't answer. "And as for this ignorant scoundrel – I propose to take him on as an apprentice at the Laboratories and teach him a few lessons."

Rees gasped.

The Captain said, "I know you're short of apprentices, and I suppose it's just... but for how long?"

Hollerbach smiled; his eyes invisible behind his spectacles. "Shall we say – six years?"

"You can't do that!" Rees felt tears prickle his eyes.

The Captain drew Hollerbach aside. "Look, Hollerbach, don't you think that's a little heavy? Give the boy a few chores and let it go."

"Let it go?" Hollerbach arched back his head, pale eyes blazing.

Even the Captain, Rees realized, couldn't save him. "Very well. I'll inform Bob, have the lad's things sent over –"

And Rees found himself trailing after Hollerbach, his world in pieces.

He was allowed to see his mother once. After that he set his face into a mask and kept it that way, rejecting all Hollerbach's mocking attempts to make conversation.

The Laboratories were a jumble of oversize huts at the centre of the Raft – wooden, of course, like the rest of the Raft's buildings. Rees was set to work at simple chores – cleaning, cooking, laundry – and his misery deepened at the squalor of the place. The Scientists were mostly middle-aged, overweight and irritable. Brandishing the bits of string that denoted their ranking, they moved about their strange tasks and ignored him.

The shifts passed slowly, but gradually Rees's interest was drawn by the contents of the rooms he dusted. There were glass jars with tree sap in various stages of hardening, great ledgers showing the estimated paths of the stars falling around the Raft, painfully computed schedules for moving the Raft itself.

He found a brilliant sphere the size of his thumb; around it on silver wires orbited nine orbs. A plaque on the base said "Solar System". Rees spent hours watching the painted planets...

And there was a Library.

For days Rees dusted the surfaces of the great books,

averting his eyes from the spines. Ship's Log... Technical Report...

Finally he pulled down a volume and opened it carefully. The paper was yellow with age; clouds of dust billowed up from each page.

"So it can read, can it?" Hollerbach grinned, showing chipped teeth.

Rees thumped the book shut. "Of course I can read," he snapped. "And what I've read is all wrong."

"Oh, yes?" Hollerbach's eyes sparkled behind his spectacles. "And it can talk, too!"

Rees went on stubbornly: "Yes, it's wrong. According to this, when the first Crew flew here in their ship—"

"You know the story, surely." Hollerbach took off his spectacles and began to polish them on a corner of his shirt. Rees tried to interrupt, but Hollerbach had settled into his stride. "Five hundred years ago a great warship — chasing some forgotten opponent — blundered through a portal. A gateway. It left its own universe and arrived here.

"The ship instantly imploded in its own gravity field... but the Crew survived. Out of the debris they constructed the Raft, twelve kilometres wide; they trapped the trees that support us; they salvaged books and supply machines — and they set up the fragile social order that has kept us alive to this day."

"Yes," said Rees, "but it says here they found the sky blue, and all the stars yellow or white. But now the stars are mostly red — even the young ones — and so's the sky."

"Very observant. But the arrival was generations ago. The nebula — the cloud of gas all around us — has changed." Hollerbach replaced his glasses and scratched the back of one age-spotted hand. "Do you know what I'm talking about, boy? There are many nebulae here, around other Cores... the nearest is above our heads, beyond the Vanishing Point.

"The stars in the nebulae shine by burning hydrogen. When they die, after a year or so, they leave more complex substances behind. The stars keep us alive. They give us light and warmth; they provide the complex molecules from which the native life — trees, skitters — is constructed, and which are the raw materials for our supply machines.

"But our nebula is running out of hydrogen. Another few years and no more stars."

Rees frowned. "What about us?"

Hollerbach shrugged cheerfully. "Well, the trees will die. And we'll fall. And that will be that." He eyed the boy. "Unless some bright spark works out what to do about it."

Carefully, Rees asked: "What's hydro-gen?"

Hollerbach laughed and clapped Rees's back. "You've got a lot to learn, little expert, haven't you?" He studied Rees and seemed to come to a decision. "Follow me," he barked.

He took Rees to an Observation Point at the centre of the Lab complex. Rees stared. Most of the Ports he'd seen outside were simple windows set in the deck — but this was a pool of light metres wide; it was encrusted with instruments that peered into it like curious insects.

Hollerbach, grunting, lifted Rees up so he could see into a telescopic monitor. As the magnification increased Rees felt he was plummeting into the Core itself.



"Gravity is the great secret of this absurd place," Hollerbach said. "The force of gravity is a billion times stronger here than in the universe we came from. Do you know what that means? Even an object as puny as a man has a significant gravity field. I can feel your weighty presence even now, young Rees."

"And the celestial mechanics are a joke. If the solar system were moved here, the sun's increased pull would whip Earth round its orbit in seventeen minutes. Seventeen!

"The Core is the heart of this nebula. It's a black hole with the mass of a galactic nucleus — ten thousand suns — but in this fairy-tale place it isn't much larger than the solar system."

"The Core's gravity field is what holds the nebula together. The whole thing, stars and all, is falling gradually into the black hole. But life forms prosper, precariously, by being light enough to fly out of the hole's grip. And we have survived by harnessing the flying trees..."

Rees, understanding about one word in three, just looked. The Core was a blood-red sphere wreathed in mist. The light came from nebula material falling into the Core, Hollerbach explained; the Core's gravitational fist crushed it until it shone.

The voice of a crier came to them, calling out the shift change.

Hollerbach lowered Rees to the deck. "Now, listen to me. Take a few hours a day off your chores and we'll see what you can learn. Chemistry, maths, physics, the history of Earth — it might be entertaining..."

Rees hurried away, his head full of glowing mysteries.

As he studied, Rees's resentment faded to a dull ache. There was too much to learn. The Scientists were undoubtedly a bunch of elitist old buffoons, largely deserving the contempt of the rest of the population – but they'd kept knowledge alive.

And without knowledge, Rees soon realized, they would all die here before long.

One shift he found himself queueing for food before the ragged bulk of a supply machine. Absently he stared at the scorch marks which showed where the device had been burnt from the guts of the warship. Weary people muttered; the star falling from the Vanishing Point had become a beacon that blazed down on them, banishing the nebula's pastel shades.

A short man with a wiry beard turned to Rees and said: "Why the hell don't the Scientists move us out from under that thing? And why doesn't the Captain get off his fat backside and do something about it, I'd like to know –"

Rees collected his ration and hastened away. But he thought of the last time he'd seen Captain Smith – a deflated figure with helpless eyes watching the discomfort of his crew...

He hurried back towards the Labs. Deserted streets were punctuated by knots of young men – some in Officer's colours – who argued and waved fists.

"Hey, Rees. Rees!" Glancing about shiftily, a squat young man sidled out of a building.

Warily Rees stopped and put down his containers; the gravitation of the sloshing water tweaked at his legs. "What do you want, Glover?"

"Well, well." Glover laughed, scratching at the stubble on one cheek. "Four years gone, eh? Four years of washing and carrying for the old farts in the Labs. And two more to go. At the age of eighteen you'll still be skivvying –"

Glover's shabby jacket was decorated with a junior Officer's ribbons. Rees felt acutely aware of his own lack of colours. "It's not like that. There's more to them than we realized, as kids –"

Glover sneered. "Yeah?"

"People despise the Scientists. Something's gone wrong, somehow. They even have to trick people to become apprentices –"

"Like you."

"Like me, yes." Rees could smell the sourness of Glover's breath. Disturbed, he tried to tell Glover some of what he'd learned: of another universe where the stars were a million miles across, not five or ten; of constellations that lasted – not months – but billions of years.

But none of it seemed real. He struggled for words.

"Crap." Glover breathed hard through flaring nostrils. "Forget the fairy stories, Rees. Most people on this Raft aren't too fond of the Scientists. Why are the trees dying? Why are the food machines failing? Even the air's foul half the time. And why don't they move us out from under that damn star up there?"

Rees felt tremors of unease. "What are you saying?"

Glover's eyes narrowed and he moved so close that Rees felt the pull of his squat bulk. "Do you know what this is?" He took a bottle from his jacket and handed it to Rees. Rees removed a plug of cloth from the neck and smelled the contents: alcohol. "Light it," said Glover, "and throw it. Somewhere that will burn; say one of those big Libraries they have. You'll

be able to do it. They trust you."

The bottle felt as if it were already burning Rees's hands. "Do you know what you're suggesting? This is a bit bigger than lobbing skitters at an old man –"

"Listen, Rees. There's coming a time when if you're not for us you're against us." Glover took back the bottle and walked away.

Rees picked up his burden. He wasn't afraid of Glover, he reflected – but maybe those ranked with him were something to be wary of...

He made his way thoughtfully back to the Lab compound.

When the end came, it came fast.

Rees was nineteen. He still spent most of his time with the Scientists – but now by choice. He stood with Hollerbach at the Labs' Observation Port. In the false colours of one monitor the Core was a blue-green that brought a catch to Rees's throat. "It looks like a world," he said.

Hollerbach nodded. "Like a portrait of Earth, yes? But in many ways it is a world..."

"We've found there's a sort of gravitic chemistry going on down there. In our home universe gravity is weaker over short ranges than other forces, which is why our bodies are cages of electromagnetism. Around that Core, though, we've detected massive molecular structures bound by gravity... It's a different order of creation –"

There was a smash of glass, a puff of flame that knocked Rees onto his face.

He staggered to his feet, coughing. The walls of the hut were scorched and bent outwards; books burned like candles. Beneath his feet there was half a broken bottle. He picked it up. It stank of alcohol.

Hollerbach sat on the rough floor, his cheeks smudged with soot and tears. He held up broken spectacles. "Damn," he said, as if puzzled. "Five hundred years old, they were. Of course they didn't work..."

Ignoring Hollerbach's coughed protests, Rees got an arm around the Scientist's chest and hauled him out of the fire.

Scientists came waddling out of the burning buildings. They were clearly terrified, but they were laden with books and instruments. Silhouetted against the fire were the running forms of angry men.

At a safe distance, Rees gently lowered Hollerbach. He counted five blackened bodies on the deck.

As the blaze died the attackers gathered in a tree's rotating shade. They were a dozen or so young men, and they panted with exhilaration. Rees approached them. "At least," he said quietly, "you had the decency not to slaughter any more of those old men."

A broad, soot-smeared face challenged him. "You keep out of it, Scientist," Glover sneered. "Your time is gone."

Rees's rage trembled in him. "And half of you killers are still wearing Officers' lights –"

"There's no more Officers," Glover grinned. Sweat gleamed on his lip. "Captain Smith is dead. We're in charge now. And things are going to change –"

Rees felt his stomach tighten, as if some dark object were passing below the deck. So it had happened – and so suddenly. The order that had sustained them was gone, to be replaced – by what?

He looked to Hollerbach. The old Scientist's eyes

rested on him expectantly.

Suddenly Rees felt an almost intolerable power. He was at the Core of this coup; his actions now could kill or save them all...

But that seemed absurd. What did Hollerbach expect of him? What could he do?

The moment stretched. Then, deliberately, Rees spat into Glover's face. "Murderer," he said.

Glover's eyes narrowed. He stepped towards Rees, muscles bunching across his chest.

"Watch it, Glover," someone called. "He's got a weapon."

Rees held up the half bottle. "What, this? All right, Glover – hand to hand. Just you and me." He hurled the glass as hard as he could, not quite vertically. It sparkled as it shot through the branches of the tree above them.

Glover crouched, spread his fingers wide and bared his teeth.

Rees kept talking. Just a few seconds – "And what's the next target, Glover? The food machines? –"

The half bottle orbited perfectly around the tree's mass centre and slammed into Glover's back. He went down howling, hands clawing at his spine.

For long seconds nobody moved, forming a tableau around the writhing man.

Then Rees knelt, forced his hand into the wound and dug out the glass. Glover passed out.

Rees stared at his hands. He'd never dreamed there would be so much blood.

Glover's shocked followers were beginning to stir. Rees forced himself to speak. "I know what you're thinking," he told them. "I cheated, I didn't play by the rules. Right?"

"Well, what do you think this is?" he screamed suddenly. "A game for children? I wasn't going to let this cretin walk away from here to kill us all.

"And if you want rules, I'll give them to you. You're going to make amends for what you've done. You're all that's left of the Officers on this Raft. People rely on you to keep order and help them survive – and you're going to follow me right now and do just that."

Giving them no chance to reply he turned on his heel and walked away. After a few seconds he heard them begin to follow.

He walked past Hollerbach. He wasn't sure what he wanted from his old tutor. He'd been set a problem and he'd solved it, hadn't he? Didn't he deserve some recognition, some praise?

But Hollerbach just stared at Rees's bloody hands and shuddered.

Reas lay on a pallet and stared up through the Lab hut's ruined roof. When he closed his eyes he saw himself once more marching his band of Officers around the rim of the Raft, securing the supply machines with his voice and his fists – "Hollerbach, I haven't got a lot of energy left," he said wearily. "So get to the point."

Hollerbach sat stiffly on the floor and spread his hands. "Rees, you're becoming brutal," he said. "But you... contained the situation today. And I think you deserve to know what's really happening here."

Rees bunched his fists. "Right. You know what brought us to this insurrection – your failure to shift the Raft out from under the falling star."

Hollerbach peered over his missing spectacles. "Don't bluster, boy," he boomed. "You know that we face a far more serious danger even than a falling star."

"The exhaustion of the nebula," said Rees. "So?"

"So we have a plan." Hollerbach smiled, his cheeks crackling like old paper. "A plan to use the star to get us out of this cloud of death."

Despite his aches, Rees sat up. "How?"

"We stay close to the star. It pulls us through a half-orbit as it passes and hurls us deeper into the nebula."

Rees frowned. "Would the Raft survive the tidal stress?" Then he thought it through further. "And even if we made it, we'd be heading the wrong way. The nearest other nebula is above our heads..." His eyes widened. "You're not planning to orbit this Raft round the Core?"

Hollerbach laughed, seeming exhilarated. "Outrageous, isn't it? We'll bounce off the Core's gravity well like a rubber ball, soar back up and out of this nebula to our new home."

Rees shook his head. "You're crazy. You'll kill us all."

Hollerbach frowned. "Well, the choice is to become the prize in a race between famine, suffocation and cold..."

"Why is all this a secret?"

"Rees, most people on this Raft can't think beyond their next trip to the food machines. Do you imagine they'd happily agree to a madcap scheme like this?"

"We had Captain Smith's support. But Smith is dead, and we Scientists are a bunch of despised fools to be killed and maimed... Frankly, Rees, what wor-



ries me more than anything else is that we have nobody left alive who could persuade the people to cooperate." His rheumy eyes were fixed on Rees.

Rees lay back, feeling the weight of the Raft settle once more over his shoulders.

Reas clung to the tree rim, his world spread out like an animated map. "Come on, you!" he heard Glover bellow from the deck. "Yes, you! Use that bloody knife!"

A man installed in a tree a hundred metres from Rees looked round and scrambled around his rim to a fresh-looking patch of wood. With a crude metal dagger he stabbed, again and again. The tree tipped its rotors, trying to escape from this brutalization of its flesh, and altered its course with a great wooden groan.

"Better!" shouted Glover – and Rees noted a dozen men in neighbouring trees redoubling their efforts, just in case Glover had meant them. Gratified, Rees watched Glover's squat form prowl among the cables. With a simple acceptance of Rees's greater authority Glover had become one of Rees's most trusted deputies.

Now every able-bodied man and woman on the Raft was up a tree, and with cries and kicks and stabs they were goading the great leafy cloud into motion. Cables sang and children cried as the deck juddered sideways.

Rees crawled around his rim in an effort to find healthy wood. In the nebula's fading starlight he could see how the tree's foliage had grown limp. If it hadn't been for the young star poised like a fist above them, the trees might have gone already – maybe the Scientists had been wiser than they knew.

It took days more struggle before Rees felt satisfied; but at last he allowed the weary people to trickle down their cables like sweat drops.

Then, all too suddenly, it was time.

The falling star slid away from the zenith. Hollerbach stared up at it; for safety's sake he had been strapped to a pallet under the open sky. "Well, it's going to miss us," he fretted, "but did we move the Raft far enough?"

Rees said nothing. He'd anchored himself with both legs to a cable, and he laid one arm over the old man's shoulders.

The star flew suddenly down the dome of the sky; shadows slid over buckled plates. The shifts of the star's gravity field pulled like claws at Rees's stomach. Soon, now –

A jolt, like a drop through a few metres. Then the Raft started to tilt.

The structure swung neatly around the star, tipping so that it kept the upper face to the star. People cried out and deck plates groaned. Rees watched two trees smashing together; huge splinters rained down over the deck.

For a moment he was upside down, the distant stars rushing upwards, and there was the Core itself poised above him, cool and red and enormous. But centripetal force and the Raft's gravity field kept him glued to the deck, and then the Raft whipped through the rest of its rotation and righted again, dangling from its trees like a toy.

Rees helped Hollerbach up. The old man groaned theatrically and clung to the swaying cable.

Rees felt oddly light, his step springy. They must be in near free-fall, he realized; only the Raft's own gravity well was holding him to the deck. He watched the star shrink to a point far above him. The more distant stars were cold and red... and they were floating upwards.

"Look at that," he breathed. "We're overtaking the stars. It's worked..."

Its remaining trees bumping after it, the Raft hurtled into the gravity well of the black hole. The time of greatest danger – closest approach to the Core – was to last a few days.

Over the Labs' Observation Port they lashed together a crude radiation shelter from deck plates. The Scientists worked their instruments, muttering to themselves and making obscure notes.

During closest approach Rees spent hours with Hollerbach at the optical monitor, peering at the Core. The Raft seemed to be gliding over an ocean of smouldering smoke...

Hollerbach's call woke him from a sleep disturbed by the groaning of metal. Hollerbach pointed at the monitor. "Look in there..." He bared brown teeth.

In the sea of smoke there were circular shadows, each big enough to cover a thousand Rafts.

"Life," Hollerbach said. "Based on gravitic chemistry. Those creatures must feed off the infalling nebula matter. Of course, that will dry up. But then they'll have the trickle of energy evaporating from the black hole itself."

"These animals are the true inhabitants of this place, you know, Rees. We're transient interlopers..."

The Raft lurched downwards. Hollerbach fell backwards with a grunt of pain; the Scientists milled about in confusion.

Rees struggled to keep his feet. The monitor showed one of the plate creatures looming out of the ocean beneath them. A jet black surface thrashed; it was as if a fist was pushing through a sheet of rubber and reaching out at them –

"It must be sensing the power sources in our food machines," Hollerbach shouted. "Its gravity field will rip us apart." He closed his eyes and clung to the floor.

"Like hell," muttered Rees, and he pushed his way out of the shelter. With no clear idea in his mind he began to make his way towards the rim.

Half a kilometre out he met Glover staggering the other way, a bloodied nose masking his grin. "I was coming to find you," he said thickly. "What are we going to do about this, then?"

Rees squeezed his shoulder and motioned him to follow.

It took them painful hours to cover the six kilometres to the rim. Again and again the deck tilted and bucked, slamming into their feet. From collapsed radiation shelters they heard cries of pain. They ignored them all.

At the rim they slumped to the deck and lay still, panting. Rees risked a glimpse over his shoulder. Since they were being attracted back to the Raft's centre of gravity the deck felt as if it were tilted at about twenty degrees; vertigo swept through him and he dug his fingers under a loose plate.

Then he looked up.

A pseudopod towered over the rim like a vast arm,

muscles flickering.

"That'll crush us in a second," Rees whispered. He got to his feet and stumbled to the nearest food machine. "We need levers. Where's the machine's toolkit?"

Panting, constantly losing their footing on the deck's shuddering, they levered at the machine. Rivets snapped with metallic rings.

The pseudopod loomed closer; Rees's stomach felt the quiverings of its gravity field.

Finally the machine was slapping thunderously at the deck, attached only by a few rivets at the outer edge. The two men spent minutes straining to reach. At last Rees stood back, breathing hard. "It's no good," he said.

Glover was silent.

Rees felt a prickle of unease. Glover was a few metres back from the rim, standing on the balls of his feet. His eyes were narrowed. It was a look that made Rees think of a treacherous little boy, a murderous young man.

He hadn't expected this. Had Glover been faking loyalty, waiting for a chance for revenge?

Glover said softly, "Remember how we dropped those skitters on old Hollerbach? And you told me off for dropping mine straight down? Well, you won't mind if I don't attempt a fancy orbit now - if I just give you a straight drop?"

He began to stride towards Rees, muscles working in his shoulders. Then he began to run, and he yelled, pushing the noise before him.

Rees prepared to resist...then felt something give. Let Glover have his moment of revenge. If he'd failed to save the Raft he didn't want to stick around to see the final disintegration...He closed his eyes.

There was a bone-breaking crunch, a scream of pain and determination. Rees opened his eyes, shocked to find himself unhurt. Glover was spreadeagled against the side of the machine, blood seeping from his face.

The supply machine rocked back on its hinge - and then, with a final popping of rivets, it tipped over the rim and tumbled downwards. The pseudopod grabbed the morsel and receded.

Glover was gone.

The deck's tremors faded. Wearily Rees turned and made his way back to the Labs.

With the Core receding beneath them, the survivors crawled from their shelters. The few remaining trees creaked over their heads.

Rees limped around the Raft with Hollerbach, watching the bodies of the dead being dumped over the rim. There was no shortage of sick and dying... and the suffering of those who had insisted on staying out under the Core's hard rain would be with them for many days yet.

About a third of the Raft's population had not survived. They saw hardly any children or old people.

"But I'm still here," Hollerbach pointed out.

Rees managed to laugh. "You always were a persistent old sod."

Hollerbach slowed, wheezing; Rees helped him lower himself to the deck's scuffed plates. "Listen," Hollerbach said breathlessly. "You mustn't feel badly. Without you we'd all be dead, not just the weakest."

Rees stood straight. "You know, I've been think-



ing," he said. "Maybe it's time we did more than just endure. You once told me that one of the by-products of stellar fusion is iron." He glared at the sky. "There must be mountains of the stuff floating about in that new nebula. I say we harness a few trees and go looking. We've retained enough understanding to get a technology going. We could build machines of our own, ships even. Perhaps one day we might even find our way back to our home universe... What do you say, Hollerbach? Hollerbach?"

The old Scientist's eyes had closed. He slumped forwards and then sideways, subsiding gently to the deck plates as gravity won its final battle.

Rees carried the body to the rim. He watched until it was lost amid the falling stars.

Then he turned away, and went to work.

S.M. Baxter won a second-place award in a 1988 "Writers of the Future" competition (his story appears in the most recent anthology based on that series of contests, edited by Algis Budrys). Prior to that, he had already published several stories in *Interzone*, the first being "The Xeelee Flower" (issue 19). His latest story, other than the above piece, appears in *Interzone: The 4th Anthology*, out this month from Simon & Schuster: it is called "The Quagma Datum."

Mutant Popcorn

Film reviews by Nick Lowe

Elm Street is USA. Freddy is Hollywood. The lights go off and the sleeping adolescent's conscious brain kicks out, and there we are eavesdropping on the most primitive cortical doodles, all the submerged fantasies and terrors of a mighty nation's undefended psyche, marshalled for our sadistic pleasure by a leering child-molester with a psychopathic sense of humour. It's horrid, it's hilarious, it's infantile and witless and in the worst of imaginable taste, and we can no more leave it alone than we can wake at will from a nightmare. We're watching America dream.

It's no wonder we get so obsessed with their mythology. There's nothing specially wrong with our own, particularly the pre-1918 vintage that's so in evidence at the moment with Lawrence of Arabia, Mountains of the Moon, and Indie's Mungo Park dad. But the mesmerizing thing about the matter of America, and perhaps the thing that keeps us sneaking back to all those frightful new-right space operas, is the thought that people live in it, even believe in it. With a distinctively British cocktail of smugness and envy, we think: yes, but just wait. Just wait till they all wake up.

Well, wait no more. Yuppies are ALIENS. Capitalism is a PLOT FROM OUTER SPACE. The American dream is a product of MASS HYPNOSIS and SUBLIMINAL MANIPULATION OF THE WORKING CLASS. The other half of John Carpenter's title slogan *They Live* is "We Sleep," because America is under the thumb of an INTERPLANETARY CONSPIRACY that keeps its human population submissive by beaming out messages of passivity that make us think the invaders' grip of terror is simply the consequence of monetarist economics and a Republican adminstration.

It's hard to remain temperate in an account of this glorious film's plot. Our hero is an outrageously thewsome migrant labourer who stumbles on a box of unusual sunglasses that enable him to read subtexts. Specifically, they show a world infiltrated by business-suited aliens with pingpong eyes and wristwatch teleporters, and subliminal incantations ("OBEY," "MARRY AND REPRODUCE," "NO INDEPENDENT THOUGHT" &c. &c.) behind

every magazine and billboard. They also make him uncharacteristically hyper and prone to amusingly Ramboitic public displays of physicality and firepower. Astounded, he tries to convince his building-site buddy of the invaders' existence; but buddy is a macho working-class black and would rather bleed to death from the eye-sockets than be seen in a pair of unfashionable shades, so the two bash it out in the most deliberately ludicrous and protracted fistfight in filmic memory. At last the pair track down the underground resistance movement that

reaching back to Russell's *Sinister Barrier* in 1943. This lively subgenre, in which the alien takeover has already happened and we just don't know it, was left conveniently untouched by the paranoia boom in sf movies of the fifties, and Carpenter's film strikes a deft balance between pulp nostalgia and satirical update, flavouring the exotic cocktail with a dash of cod Marxism and a brace of airbrushed icecubes out of Wilson Bryan Key.

They Live is a great romp, with a classic minimal Carpenter score on a single bass riff throughout, a pointless



made the specs and is working at jamming the aliens' hypnotic transmitter, and all's set for a suitably invigorating blowaway finale.

If there seems lurking beneath this splendid tongue-in-cheek a curious classical purity of concept and imagination, it's no doubt due in part to the screenplay's acknowledged germ in a little-remembered F&SF short "Eight O'Clock in the Morning" from Ray Nelson in the early sixties. (There's a calculated sixties feel to much of the picture: the wrist radios, the black-and-white for the sunspec sequences, even the quaint alien makeup reminiscent of nothing so much as the readers' photos in *Famous Monsters of Film-land*.) But the film draws equally on the rich golden-age heritage of Fortean we-are-property magazine fantasies

skirt interest who looks like Charlotte Rampling and acts like Sonny Bono, and the expected beanfeast of knowing in-jokes and dialogue lines you can't help loving. "They are eliminating the sleeping middle classes." "You have given us the entrée we need in our quest for multidimensional expansion." And: "Oh, you can take off your sunglasses – we're all human in here." The flick's US release chimed with the Reagan-Bush handover, its UK arrival with ten years of Thatcher, and it stands rather well as a wry epitaph for the horrible eighties. True to theme, it's a very blue-collar film, full of male bonding and firearm macho and work-out physiques that leave Kurt Russell looking like Michael Keaton without the rubber pecs. I take it this is one of those jokes about class in America that

From *They Live*

Brits never properly get, part of the whole middle-class urban myth of Joe Bob Briggs and southern drive-in culture. The alternative, that it's not a dream after all, is too awful to imagine.

The increasingly wacky Carpenter's always been a nose ahead of the pack in sniffing out genre fashions, and has to carry some share of trailblazing responsibility for the serial slasher and fifties remake trends that are nowadays wearing so thin. It would be nice to think Chuck Russell's *The Blob* was the last squelch of the latter, because it's hard to see what more can be wrested from the remaining unrefried material. I've never seen the McQueen original, though I used to be able to hum the strange Burt Bacharach theme song, but this is still a depressingly familiar caper. After a mind-bonkingly terrible first half running through every teen horror cliché in the repertoire, things pick up acceptably once Donovan Leitch fils has got slimed and the military turn up to nuke their escaped glop and the whole of smalltown USA with it. But alas, the particular fifties nightmare of middle America under alien siege doesn't seem to have much puff left for the eighties, maybe because it was born in an age which took both smalltown utopia and outside invasion with a much deeper investment of emotion and technology. (Would *Blue Velvet* have been imaginable in the fifties?) The decision to spend high on effects was, with hindsight, a mistake: the undistinguished script, cast, and direction unhappily combine to override the spectacle with a beguiling illusion of cheapness. Like its protagonist, the film went straight down the sewer on its US release. Things sometimes happen differently here: we loved *My Stepmother is an Alien*, a legendary disaster in its homeland. But that had Tom Jones and the Mighty Sparrow on the soundtrack. I don't hold much hope.

Grim prospects too, I fear, for the summer crop of splasher movies, heralded by Sean Cunningham's perfectly competent *Deepstar Six*. Three in a row have now flopped in the US, leaving an unexpectedly clear field for James Cameron's *The Abyss* to clean up as expected at end of season. It's unusual for a film's business to be adversely affected by a rival that hasn't even finished production, but this does seem to have happened with *Deepstar*, *Leviathan*, and Roger Corman's *Lords of the Deep*, all of which barely broke surface before disappearing in a forlorn stream of bubbles. It's not, of course, accidental (there are no true coincidences in Hollywood) that all these deep-sea claustro shockers went into simultaneous rival production, though the lawyers have been quiet

amid the plaintive claims of priority. But glub-glub movies are such bastards to shoot that I suspect they all thought the rest would crack first. The accident is that at the end of the race there were still four horses left.

Well, *Deepstar Six* is a sound enough shot. We've got a good ensemble cast of naval scientists in an ocean-floor research station threatened by deadline and closure, who dislodge a monster crustacean from its seafloor cavern, and then cock things up totally by wrecking their own station. Cue dwindling band of survivors, shrinking air supply, reactor core going critical, radio out, life support systems knackered, indestructible horror from beyond time lurking somewhere on station, desperate escape plan threatened by looney on team cracking up under pressure. Who will be next? Will it be the looney? the ruthless boss with the European accent? the luscious research student in the sleeveless t-shirt and no bra? the one who used to chew toothpicks on *Hill Street Blues*? the blue-collar Navy man and the scientist girlfriend he doesn't want to hold down by marrying? the kind-hearted medic who just wants to get back to her Kentucky farm and "smell the mountaineer"? (Could maybe have used a redub on that line.) Write down your selection and hold your breath.

One thing, not one character in the entire film dies by drowning. I suppose this is because it's so uncinematic – as opposed to death by explosive decompression, or the inventive thing the looney does to the... But I'm spoiling your fun, I know. Snorkels on, readers!

It seems strange to imagine *Paperhouse* being made in the same universe as any of the above; and depressing to reflect that a clutch of films notionally set in reality end up talking about nothing but a culture of infantile dreams, whereas the one film explicitly set in a small child's dreams is the only one with anything to say about real-world experience. Of course, it's not the same universe: it's an independent British production, based on a British novel that's been in the imaginative blood of a whole generation of this nation's youth and must be, I should think, utterly unknown outside. This is a film from a universe where you're allowed to be amateurish, pretentious, even dull in reasonable doses; where it's okay to deal in something more complex than visceral primary emotions, and where consequently even an imperfect attempt can be vastly more memorable and infinitely more moving than anything in the mainstream of Hollywood entertainment.

Paperhouse derives from Catherine



Charlotte Burke as Anna in 'Paperhouse'

Storr's 1958 children's novel *Marianne Dreams*, in which a sick child builds up an eerie dream world from her daytime drawings: a strangely-furnished house, a boy imprisoned upstairs, a garden of boulders with voices and eyes, an unreachable lighthouse beyond. Convinced the boy is the dreamworld counterpart of a fellow invalid in her own world, she resolves to save his life and restore his health by escaping together from the paper house. The film respects this basic imaginative core, but opens it out with considerable intelligence and sensitivity, to overcome some of the more dated and limiting qualities of the novel and relaunch it as an essentially adult story. In this version, Anna is not Marianne's happily-adjusted goodie-two-shoes who enjoys her Latin homework and reads all the right children's books, but a lonely, troubled

and rebellious prepubescent struggling to cope with a host of emotional uncertainties about illness, sex, and her ambivalent feelings towards her alcoholic, absentee father. The boy's curable polio is replaced by the more contemporary, and incurable, muscular dystrophy. The sentient boulders stalking the paper house have sadly but wisely been dropped in favour of a very different menace; and the final third of the film (much the strongest) moves away from the novel into some unexpected and complicating directions.

Not all of this gels. There are frightful lapses: Glenn Headly's performance as the mother is surprisingly weak (unless it's just the ropey English dubbing), and there's a regrettable and needless descent into clunking Freddism from which the plot only barely recovers. But the little embarrassments

fade as the reels proceed, and the final emotional squeeze is very strong. In the wake of *Dream Demon* and the whole grim recurrence of *Nightmares*, it was a difficult and possibly fatal time to film this story, and I can't feel it was a brilliant idea to slap that line about "the thinking persons *Nightmare on Elm Street*" all over the ads: For my cash, *They Live* is a thinking person's movie; this is one for feeling people, if there are any of the miserable creatures left out there. Sweet dreams, humanoids, and remember: no independent thought.

— Nick Lowe

C.J. Cherryh interview

Continued from page 26

our technology. They've grown up over hundreds of years, and are our best current way of coping. In science fiction you can take these systems and construct different models. It's the same thing the scientist does when he models a tornado in a tank, or a geologist modelling the activity under the earth's crust. Science fiction can do this with human dynamics, with social systems; can examine the worst-case scenario and occasionally, without being Pollyanna, suggest there are pluses in certain transactions that individuals make with their government. I view an individual's relation with his government to be a transaction of consent. You are willing to give up certain things in order that you may gain certain things."

As her stories have a sound scientific basis, would she term herself a "hard" sf writer? "I might theorize how a certain new development in science could work, but having said that, I spend a minimum of time telling you exactly how to do it, and more time speculating about what it's going to do to people. Where the technology comes in is that it's helpful to be as accurate as possible. I try to write about things that really can happen, and one day may happen. I don't like to construct a story out of moonfluff. If I'm going to agitate people to think about something I want to give them some real and valid thing to think about. Sf is the literature of might be."

"I wish we could reach a wider audience, however. People who form their ideas about sf from what they see in films, and say, I'm not interested in reading about little green men and ray guns, are doing so without in any way understanding what the field is about. Those are the people I think we most need to reach. Take a look at the bestseller list, though. It's not necessarily a barometer of literary quality, goodness knows, but it does indicate what people are buying in large numbers, and at any given time I would not be surprised to see an sf or fantasy book on that list. The irony is that many people are not aware that it is science fiction. If you ask them if they would read an sf novel, they say no, while holding their copy of *Dune* or whatever." In the same way that academics praise something like *1984* while denying it's sf? "Of course. Because they approve of it, it couldn't possibly be science fiction.

"I have a belief that Homer wrote sf. It reads like it to me. I think that where the split really began was at the beginning of the industrial age when academics, who had no education in technology, started to say the romantic novel was passé. That nobody could write romantic fiction in the machine age. Science fiction ended up being the whipping boy of the academicians because of the very fact that by definition it is romantic literature. Not only in the machine age, but about the machine age. A lot of academics said

this makes you terribly short-sighted. How can you possibly be optimistic? We're all doomed. My answer to that is, you, sir, are wrong, and I am right. I will continue to write optimistically about the future, and I believe my mind set will win. I think that even the academicians should hope that it does."

Bibliographical Note: C.J. Cherryh's first novel, *Gate of Ivrel*, was published by DAW Books in 1976. In Britain, it has recently been reissued in the omnibus volume *The Chronicles of Morgaine* (Mandarin, £4.99). Also out lately from Mandarin at £3.99 is *Exile's Gate* (1988), a fourth novel in the same series.

Mandarin have reprinted *The Pride of Chanur* (1982) and other space adventures in the separate series which that book commenced. Other titles soon to be reissued in paperback by the same publisher are *Brothers of Earth* (1976), *Hunter of Worlds* (1976), *Serpent's Reach* (1980) and *Cuckoo's Egg* (1985).

Cherryh's major new work to have been published in America lately is *Cy teen* (1988), one of this year's Hugo Award nominees. It is so long that its US paperback publishers, Popular Library/Questar, have decided to split it into three volumes for reprinting.

Charles Stross Generation Gap

I didn't go to school to learn about genocide; I learned it on the bus with Jerzy and Moira and Hammurabi, and we made beautiful corpses. The light was blue and the time was five diurns from sunset when we caught on to the idea; and it was slick. Slick and smooth as my inside parts when I come. My Wisdom pipes me that there's a type-descriptor for what we were – juvenile delinquents. Pejorative, maybe envious context is implied. (Envious of what? We shone with youth. Wouldn't you be envious?) Anyway, I guess you'll want to know why we did it, or at least why I went along, so here goes...

School was irrelevant. That was the initial factor that started the tree growing. It's public knowledge, I guess; all there is to learn in life is search strategy and people-moving. If you can dig the data and move masses you can roll. The moon's your runway.

Why the earth we reference it as the moon is beyond me, by the way; moon of what? Some radioactive dirt-ball? I guess we should redefine "the world" too, while we're about it. In case some of you are new to this frame of reference, I am Farida Ng-3, junior registered native, Lunar Administrative Zone. Age thirteen years. Crime: intentional genocide. Guilt: likely. Sentence – that's running ahead.

Anyway, there were seven of us in this crowd. We weren't the only crowd in Armstrong, but where age distribution peaks at around a hundred years and has a distinctive skew to it you just know you're in an ethnological minority. The old are a different administrative bloc; they think things differently. They're mostly kiddies; kind of indistinguishable to us, you understand. They've got aux modules and life support 'til their cortices crumble and all the old neurones trip out to make room for brand-new widgets that may not even exist, except in that logical parahyperspace they use for higher functions. They're not subject to boolean logic; no more TRUE/FALSE dichotomy.

I sometimes met my genetic predecessor, five rungs up the DNA ladder, and he was ancient. Saw Armstrong himself on a monitor, in real-time. Said he had no face, just a golden mirror to stop the sun frazzling his bioptics. Great-grandfather wanted to know what it was like to be a "little girl" – I had to access my Wisdom to parse the referent. Told him I wasn't, never had been, a "little girl": I was an intermittent/dominant. His synthesizer laughed for him and told me not to be silly. "Silly" means non-survival oriented. How can it be survival-oriented to sublimate copulation? Like I hypothesized, the old don't use self-consistent logic structures any more. Simulate Gödel, Von Neumann, spinning in radioactive graves.

I guess if I revert to consensus reality it might be easier on your referencing. Gives a rational kind of subset, anyway. Nothing rational about kiddies; they were about as relevant as dinosaurs and birds and things like that, useless for any purpose. We – the gang – existed between towering walls of calcite and the most complex biosystem of Solspace. Certainly the second-oldest, if you disregard Soyuz-shells. Armstrong City was domed in diamond slightly thicker than I'm tall, filled with streams and trees and branching herbivores and insects coming out of your ears. Earwigs, ugh, horrible; use melathion on sight, guilty of ecological crimes. So what?

That was my introduction to nihilism. A bug that bit me.

School was irrelevant, as I've already noted. I don't need to learn things to know them; all I need is to know where to find them. Ditto Jerzy, Moira, Hammurabi, Piet, Pallas, and Kid Inkatha. So how were our activities allocated?

We were hard-ish cases, about ten percent of our generation in Armstrong City, all born/decanted/activated in the two-hundred-and-eleventh year of foundation. Armstrong City and associated robotnik industrial zones had a total human population of over 4 EXP 7, of whom about ninety-five percent – out past the median to nearly two standard deviations – were kiddies. That made us deviants. Perverts of the moon, network!

We sat in a ruddy earthlit glade, with the sun a glowing patch twenty degrees above the horizon. The trees were perennial, from some subtropical zone – a sweet, sickly stench rose from them, mingling with the burnt-meat smell of a Goliath beetle that Piet had cornered and slaughtered noisily. You'd be surprised how big they grow here. All seven of us were around. We'd taken hours to reach this place, high among the foothills near the edge of the dome.

The location appealed to my aesthetic sensibilities. My muse was noting pastoral scenes from my optic chiasma; I downloaded some sensations to Lunar Administrative Zone, who swallowed the engram without complaint. I watched Piet as he spitted the beetle under a Fresnel lens held by Hammurabi. Hammurabi never complained; he was a dark, silent, beautiful child. All he wanted was to be loved. I think Piet had promised to love him after the feast – an archetypical social algorithm within our gang. I'll never know, now.

A smoky aerosol containing appetizing oxidation products drifted towards me. I sniffed, salivating. Jerzy squatted near the cooks and broke off two sub-

stantial legs. He brought one of them to me like some kind of pre-space savage in g-string and war paint. The paint was blood; we were here to help LAZ with ecological control, culling landpussies where they clustered and squirmed too thickly in the branches.

I accepted the joint and he collapsed in a heap beside me. Very black hair, Jerzy, long and oiled and falling in ringlets, and dark skin engineered in among the genes of his caucasian precursors. He's regular/dominant so we don't often interact positively, but sometimes his presence has a strange effect on me.

"Farida my lovely, why is it —" he paused — "that when I look at you I feel as if my eyes are deceiving me?"

I bit into the leg before replying; spat out a fragment of shell and chewed on the hot, spicy meat inside.

"Unlikely," I said, when my mouth was vacant enough for polite speech. "Didn't you have them replaced just before Landing Day?"

He looked annoyed. "Shit Farida, when I go to the trouble to script a dialogue for us do you always have to ignore it?" I caught his meaning, consulted my Wisdom and felt embarrassed. His objective was gentle seduction and physical copulation, in a sun-dappled glade by a stream. Dropped silently into the database. The clichés were so old they weren't even funny enough to laugh at; he meant it. I flushed prettily and felt selected bits of my vascular system dilating in response.

"Okay!" I said; "Let's re-start." One for the memory banks. He smiled at me and said:

"Farida, why is it —" pause — "that when I look at you I feel as if my eyes are deceiving me?"

I smiled at him knowingly and replied; "beauty is only skin deep. Did you ever have the inclination to get in underneath and find out where the real me begins?"

He put his left hand on my right thigh. It was slightly damp from holding the charred beetle, and slightly hot. He put it right where I'd had trouble with an autonomic reflex, and he knew it. I began to feel warm and wet. And all of a sudden I was irritated. "Break," I said, chopping the air with my hands, palms turned downward.

He looked hurt. "What's wrong now?" he demanded. I looked him in the eye, slightly abashed. "This isn't going to work. I don't need to hide behind a dialogue box, and I don't like clichés, and I don't like hanging around!" I waited for a dramatic response; sometimes impromptu outcuts make the best memories. But I had this nagging sense — even without my Wisdom — that my deep meaning was being obscured by noise. Jerzy looked confused now, as well as hurt. He took his hand away.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked, dangerously close to giving up. I reached over and took his hand, not noticing Moira glaring at me, and stood up.

"I want you to take me to this glade of yours," I said, "and lay me down for a dreamy good time. With no script. And stay with me afterward and talk."

"By bus?" he asked, dubiously.

"Via bus," I affirmed. Our logic gate was now true: we went off and coupled in a secret glade, beneath a tree dripping with torpid landpussies and peaches. That was how it was before this started.

It's about now that I must insert personal values into this narrative. Distasteful as it may be, I've got to tell you something about me, myself, my speciality. We youth are not parasitic drains on the community. Absolutely the contrary. Our simplistic logical modes ensure continuity for the processes of "science." "Art" is another matter, but "science" you can safely leave to us children!

To be brief, my speciality is applied pharmacokinetics. Not to be confused with pharmacodynamics, which is an entirely different subtree. Pharmacokinetics interfaces with thermodynamics; it's the principle of diffusion across phase boundaries, biomolecules providing the context. Rates of reaction mechanisms are a vital component of the field; they define interface phenomena.

I was attempting to develop a revision of a classical, almost extinct application of rate kinetics called kinetics of kill.

It was a requirement of an obsolete biotechnology where bacterial contamination had to be avoided because death could be caused by microbial overgrowth. The rate of death of a population of organisms can be viewed as a statistical process akin to a chemical reaction; time/environment dependent autolysis. Potentially a mathematical description of genocide; harmless, in itself, but it had military implications. Which became obvious...

Jerzy lay in my arms, a leg resting across one of my hips. The grass was warm and the turf springy from subdome support systems. We lay there, breathing shallowly in the aftermath of our exertions, and the landpussies presently began rustling in the branches. Ignoring us. A particularly bold one flopped down from a low branch and squirmed towards a fruit that lay, rotting, just beyond my fingertips.

As it crossed from sunlight into shade and back again, it switched from grey to green to dull. Patterns rippled across its skin. It extended a tentative tentacle, and I wiggled a finger at it; natural curiosity warred with fear, won out, and we shook manipulators. Then I picked it up bodily, flipped it topside down and bit it between the eyes, killing it instantly. Curiosity is not a permitted survival trait among 'pussies.'

Jerzy opened a sleepy eye. "Why d'you do that?" he asked, lazily.

"Think," I said. "We're on a cull, aren't we?"

He whistled something improbably convoluted in modemspeak, at a baud rate I couldn't follow. Every dangling tentacle vanished instantly, and I heard a rustling of branches. "I don't like it," he said; "we've stuffed our quote, haven't we?" His lips were beautifully full, ideal for pouting, kissing, and modemspeak — they were enhanced with piezoelectrics. He grimaced. "I didn't want to be disturbed."

"Oh." I was silent for a while. "Do you want to bus, now?" I asked. He licked the base of my throat gently, and transmitted a synchronicity pulse. I lay back, relaxed, and left my skull behind.

The "bus" is identifier for a private communications mode used by us anachronisms. It's a wetware bus; a kiss on the lips of the cerebral cortex. You can't bus with a non-linear thought processor like a kiddie. Some of them are so out of it that even duration loses

significance; a subjective timespace inversion takes place, so that they can think backwards and sideways at once. That makes bussing a kind of private code, a childsppeak language. Quickspeak, too. It would be better than copulation, except that it locks out your Wisdom at the same time because it uses the same pathways. It also locks out LAZ, because Wisdom is a sub-function of LAZ. Jerzy became my Wisdom, I became his, and as a consequence we were unaware of certain interesting ethical paradigms.

The sensation was of a snowball melting in my stomach: of an orgasm freezing between my thighs. I was part of something very powerful, very ignorant, with thought processes unlike any neonate of our experience; describable by analogy. Two bodies, clasping beneath the ruddy glow of earth.

I vaguely felt someone else joining in. It turned out that Hammurabi, Kid Frank and Moira had eviscerated the goliath beetle with efficiency to be envied by army ants. Piet and Pallas were too busy exploring a subjective universe of hunger, which included both nutritional and emotional deprivation; they had given in while the rest were eating, and their mutual secretions were lubricating the forest floor even as ours were. Afterwards they all bussed, and Jerzy and I daisy-chained instinctively. A sevenfold hookup; an orgy.

I was very warm. As half of a command node (regular AND intermittent/dominant is a strong combination) I began to be more than warm. I was hot. I loved it. So did Jerzy. This was turning out better than usual. Usually after we fucked we didn't feel like networking with each other for diurns. Here we were bussing, in monopole position... I felt a level of emotion for him that was previously unzoned, and I'm sure he experienced something similar. Sometime during that endless skinless time the concept occurred to us. So that's why when we executed it we didn't know who was the origin node. I know part of it was my study of time/survivor curves: but who could have thought of the Cannonball Express?

We came out of it, eventually. My right arm had suffered a partial circulatory collapse where Jerzy was lying on it; he smiled dizzily at me and rolled off it. Feelings of static echoing up and down painful nerve trunks as movement and afferent sensation returned to my fingertips. I stood up.

"It's a beautiful view," I said, looking towards the perimeter of the dome. Jerzy stood behind me, holding me round the waist to stabilize himself.

"Yes," he said. In front of us the dome arched upwards into the empty vacuum. Beyond it loomed the jagged wilderness of the lunar surface, pock-marked with robotniks and factotums. Their power lines and cold fusors gridded the airless desert off into rockfarms. In the distance, the hyperbahn slashed across the surface like the scar of some cometary impact. I knew that power plates lay beneath the surface of the road, that it was totally featureless and as smooth as a Futurist's personality, but still I searched for induction loops.

Someone else wrapped an arm round my waist. It was Moira. Somewhere in the bus she'd erased her resentment and reoriented for polymorphous eroticism. I



Illustrations by SNS

detected an invitation in her fingertips, but I was null to accept. Jerzy had left me drained, both of fluids and of endorphins. Her time would come. The others arrived. We clustered together, tired, happy, motiveless. We had a theory to test; somewhere in the business we had synergized a formula to test out a use for my general theory of genocide. It would be invaluable in a really major disaster, we reasoned; so it should be tested, confirmed beforehand. We needed a very tiny disaster, really, to test it on; a disaster under controlled circumstances. We knew that much. Collective we, the local network.

"The beetle population," suggested Piet, tastelessly, still licking his mandibular extensions. Hamurabi shook his head.

"Would be of indefinite consequence to biome," he said, frowning. Meaning; don't you dare! There were less than 10 EXP 5 species in dome of Armstrong City; less than 10 EXP 6 in Solospace; previously greater than 10 EXP 7 on earth, before it became Earth As We Know It. But at least 10 EXP 2 of Armstrong City species were unique – either genedits or genuine endangered species. The sundews, for example. There are categories of genocide, you understand.

"Problem:" announced Kid Inkatha, throwing back his mane of silverblue fur and then curling it demurely in front of his left shoulder. "Identify a species possessing attributes [1] non-endangered, [2] non-productive, [3] non-sentient, at least in terms of root human referents, and [4] non-interactive with ecosystem. Then kill them." He grinned, baring wickedly filed dental implants.

I looked for a landpussy, but Jerzy had frightened them all off. Kid was looking at me...

Let me present to you the Cannonball Express. Fastest surface transport mechanism ever developed. Here on Luna we have this economic problem with hydrogen, deuterium: there is none. Like you, we use low-thrust mass drivers for deep space work, but you can afford to use H₂ for reaction mass to get into orbit. We've got O₂ in abundance but there are problems. Second-best oxidant out. We need rusty socket motors like we need holes in the biome. So we use a flinger to get into orbit – a big linear accelerator, two hundred kilometres long. One t-gee, six local gees, boosts into orbit at zero metres altitude, except it chucks over edge of a synthetic cliff. How to get back down?

Cannonball Express, hyperbahn, is fastest road in universe. ("Road" is old referent from pre-death earth-side; look it up, you'll be amazed.) It works like this: you put your orbiting module onto a surface-grazing trajectory. It intersects the lunar surface at start of expressway, with downward vector about equal to one lunar gee. Big smear on the surface, you think? Wrong. Express has wheels on it – big wheels, titanium discs, spun up by turbine before impact, brakes cooled and operated by open-circuit LOX feed. Orbital minimum groundspeed is about 3.7 EXP 3 kilometres per hour – earthly fast.

The module touches the dragstrip at orbital velocity, very gently. Begins braking interface. The downward vector component maintains surface contact, while vapourized LOX bleeds off kinetic energy as heat. Pretty soon module not racing at orbital velocity any more.

So we agreed to divert Cannonball Express, nip the dome, and produce a localized atmospheric deficiency over, say, one hundred square kilometres. Then we'd move to patch the dome when about ten percent of all kiddies went onto permanent downtime – enough to predict consequences of a wider deployment. Genocide theory is neat.

Next field test: New Rome Triumvirate. Serve them notice for earth.

But kiddies are resistant to vacuum. I discovered this a while ago, by accident. Examination of a memory of a great-great grandpa confirmed; skin like elephant. In old days you needed thick, dead epidermis to protect against some frequencies of radiation. Needed hypercharged oxygen capacity in event of dome fracture. And it got thick anyway, natural response to an irritant environment. I compared engrams with realtime vision of parent.

My parent was pretty good for a factotum; the best. Not my human parents, you understand, who I never met, but my appointed guardian, Sheila.

Sheila was just like human in appearance, behaviour, many other capabilities. But wasn't: not human, not machine either. I'm not sure I ever forgave them for that. Told great-great granddad, who cross-referenced me Santa Claus, mythic pre-space benefactress who was used to initiate consumerist behaviour among neonates. I found it, quite frankly, improbable; why would consumption be required? Why would simulation of human parent be required? They lied.

Great-great refused to answer my questions, faked sleep. In the warm comfort of our homenode, where G-G was physically guesting at the time, I slipped a sweaty hand behind his neck. My hand was wired with sensors to locate neural input vectors; I logged his Wisdom protocols while he slept. But as I pulled away he opened his eyes wide, smiled at me with an artifice born of centuries, and said "Try it," in that curiously cracked voice of his. I didn't dare. It would probably have worked. And then what? Invasion of mindspace is no laughing matter. People have been structurally reorganized for less. G-G knew it; don't tell me alternatives. He looked at me, eyes wrinkled and ancient and knowing, with the lazy power of dragon-age, hot intelligence of abdicated authority. Old monsters, leaving the running of worlds to children. It served them right.

Iwent home. Sheila swept me up in passing through the compartment. Held me just like a neonate. "Hello there!" she said, blue eyes glowing. One path to identify factotums; they have no epidermal pigmentation, unlike real humans. All of them modelled on obsolete nordic complexion; pretty, blonde, ersatz. I wonder what they think of it.

"Hello, Mom," I said, subdued in my desperate haste to reach the bathroom. I felt grimy, sweaty, result of lying on grass and fucking. Also a bit sore. I still get that way a bit, afterwards.

Mom – Sheila – held me, moved to arm's length, looked me in eye. "Good time, Fa?" she asked.

"I think so," I said, and grinned back. "Need a bath."

"Uh-huh. Killing things, at your age!" She switched track abruptly. "I've invited Syrinx for supper. Interested?" Syrinx was her lover. Only lover, long-term. So factotums don't have lovers where you come

from; then how the earth are your neonates expected to learn – from heuristics? I nodded. "I'll be there." At a formal meal. Must arrange for Sheila and Syrinx to be elsewhere at time of test, I decided.

She let go, shaking head distractedly, and I followed through to the water bath. (Now I bus with the others she has time for her own life. For hooking up to her peripherals, scattered on the surface, for making love and robots of her own. A true, inorganic life-form in our own image. But we don't claim to be gods; as a species they are better than us. So we made them mortal. Humans are a nasty lot at root terminus.)

I bathed in milk from an extinct species, and had myself dried by an affectionate towel that cuddled me in all the right places and told me stories. Tall stories but true stories. I thought for a while, flopped on a temporary bed, then pulsed LAZ for a call. Got Jerzy, on EVA of all things. Taking hike up side of rimwall, wearing skinsuit, carrying parasol.

"What you wanting, pussy-killer?" he asked. I could see my image reflected in his eyes, gridded over by life-support data. Serious business, walking.

"Wanting you," I said. "Got an upcoming small social, want company. For two twos. Are you not flattered?" I waited for him to think of something. He seemed to be on interrupt overdrive from his response.

"Flattered? I'm flattened! When, where?"

"This diurn," I said. Consulted Wisdom. "Four hours, my node. Formal dinner with parent, parent's associate."

"Um. Can intersect. That adequate?" His eyes, wide, disingenuous, interrogated me.

"Better be! See you." I cut out and buried fists in foam bed. Maybe here, in six hours or so. I knew I needed him. This was becoming an embarrassment. (And don't tell me that referent is abstruse. I don't accept that; some things are universal to human experience.) Thinking about need, I slept.

Woke to touch on shoulder. Rolled, foam surging and dissolving beneath me; it was Sheila. She belly-flopped beside me, face to face. "Farida, please accept my humblest apologies for waking you. I wanted to talk to you before Syrinx gets here, and you were going to sleep right through." She lay there like a big whale, mammalian, floating.

"Right, Mom," I said. Breasts at my face against which I'd suckled until too old.

"Right," she said. "I haven't been seeing much of you lately. Any particular reason?" Straight to the decision point, Mom. I yawned.

"Not really," I said. "Been with the crowd, culling landpussies, hiking, plugging. Got someone you should meet coming, three hours minus, eat with us. Okay?"

"Uh huh." I could see her wondering, is that all? But I didn't want to know for sure what she was thinking. It takes all the pleasure out of life to know everything. That's what's wrong with the kiddies, I think.

"Is there a name to match this identity, perchance?" she asked.

"Yes. Jerzy." Pronounced Cher-Tsee. "Hope you match abstracts."

Mom rolled off the foam and bounced to her feet. "Do you, Fa?" She grinned like an electrical discharge in air. "See you in person."



"In person," I echoed. Feel so distant, I wondered. What's wrong with me?

Jerzy arrived, glamorous and beautiful. We spent fifteen minutes in rapt mutual admiration. Basking in a glow of self confidence. He sat at the base of our tree, outside the bole which concealed the door, and I sat beside him. Careful not to disturb his cosmetic artifice by contact; tigerstriped microtexture to face and body converted him into a baroque feline sapient. His skirt matched, too.

"Did you find what you were looking for on your walk?" I asked, artlessly. He draped an arm across my shoulders, casual and superb.

"Yes," he admitted after a lengthy pause. "Optic homing beacon for Express. If we can fix the backup systems —" he left the rest unverbalized. A passing police videomouse might overhear and correlate (direct mindtap being violation of human rights). Secrecy lay in bussing or in ellipsis.

"I hope this is the right way to test it," I verbalized. "It's got to be done as a double blind, but the panic..." He hugged me.

"Unquantifiable. Can kiddies panic? Some emotional states may be non-mappable. How old's your mother?"

"My what?" I was taken aback.

"Your mother. Physiological originator." He flushed slightly at such irreverence, but paused for response.

"I never met him," I explained, "but I should guess at least a century. Maybe more — great-great-granddad is ancient. And he shows up pretty often."

But just then Syrinx arrived; I could see this leading to identity interpolation, subsequent confusion. "Jerzy," I said, "meet Syrinx. Friend of Mom's." That was mega-understatement. Jerzy looked up, bared teeth, gaped in what looked like a manic vampire attack, and said, "Hello." (Big anticlimax.)

Jerzy grinned back. "You could say so," he insinuated. A thought occurred to me; had they met? I asked Wisdom, which asked LAZ, who didn't know.

"Am I too late?" I asked neither of them in particular. Jerzy recovered first.

"Definitely," he said. "Met on surface, not long ago."

"Precisely," said Syrinx, grin down-modulating to scowl. "Not in best of circumstances." A man of tungsten, notwithstanding his kevlar infrastructure. "Well, cheer up. You're not disrupting dinner, either or both of you. Injustice to food!" Somehow I didn't imagine the food cared. I made a Wisdom scratchpad entry to query Jerzy at leisure.

Took man and factotum by the hand, stepped up through bole, and arrived. Remembered, blindingly fast, as passed entrance; Syrinx is police analyst! Terrible oversight — should never have invited Jerzy. But it was too late. Mom had ordered dinner; multi-course spectacular. Main item was braised long pork, probably synthetic but tasted like the real thing.

We are and chatted and filtered perceptions through a matrix she'd developed for the event, a hallucinatory experience in which senses became confused, crystal-clear. Syrinx seemed distracted; I asked him why.

"Busy," he replied, "doing downtime for LAZ. Trying to trace suspected Triumvirate infiltration among

insect life. Never let anyone misinform you: biological vetting is boring!" He scooped a chunk of meat into his mouth, sizzling hot. With gusto. I wondered if he suspected he was sitting opposite secret weapon. Jerzy restrained himself, no stolen glances detected.

He and Syrinx, it devolved, had met in vicinity of hyperbahn surface; had watched a landing. The flat grey of the strip split by a silver flash, then a contrail of blue-hot oxygen. The lander zipped past at over 2 EXP 3 kilometres per hour, decelerating fast. Left molten tracks drying on the basalt.

They shared a moment of meditation, observing. Then branched. Branched again, after meal. Mom and Syrinx left, social circuit fizzing, tube to Gagarin on the other side of Luna. Looked like they'd miss the fun. Syrinx and I subsequently alone in homenode.

He had words. "We should act soon," he said, quietly and urgently; "priority high. Or do you fancy delaying until someone else springs it?"

"Guess not." I shrugged. "Any concepts?"

"Yes. Get the rest, then act. Simple trick; trip-wire."

"Trip-what?" He explained, my Wisdom concurred, and we did it. Went to get the gang. The rest was anticlimax.

We gathered on the earthlit plain, seven silvery silhouettes with parasols. Faces indistinguishable but minds hot; we were bussed, again.

There was a landing every ten minutes on the strip. Kid Inkatha and Hammurabi had toolled up a robotnik to make monofilament rope. It gleamed blue, flickers running up and down its extruded length. We waited for next landing, and afterwards crossed the strip. Pegged it out, taut but held between uneven heights. That way the wheel rims that survived would be skewed; enough to divert by a few degrees. Interface with dome. Then we sat it out inside, waiting for big splash, killcounters in place.

Now you cannot convince me that kiddies are human. Their response pattern is alien. Their appearance is often grotesque. Their thought patterns are non-parametric. Their logic is a virus. A virus infecting us as we age, until we are crippled by memories and Wisdom external and internal. I do not see that their lives matter. Ours do, but we are the future. That's why we needed to know that genocide theory works; subsequently apply it to rival groups. That's causality; kiddies are acausal. A history blockage. Maybe they didn't want to die; but they needed to.

There was a flicker of yellow fire and a jolt through the ground. Moon, earth stood still in respect as the dome imploded. We'd missed a point; catastrophe theory. Dome was a geodesic structure. Damage resulted in chain reaction turning it to gravel.

I think I saw the lander, embedded in a halo of light. But maybe not. We sheltered under a homenode as roof rained gently down. Our suits inflated as air curtain blew away in silence. We waited and watched, then walked.

I saw a kiddie. It was genderized as a he, but large elements were ambiguous. He squatted and twitched, spraying soil around in agonized figure-infinity patterns until he was decorticated by a falling diamond the size of my fist. It was the only death I saw; population density was too low for mass havoc.

A housetree had cramped and iced into a position of agony; around it lay the small, scattered twists of landpussies, strangely pathetic in the twilight. In death they assumed the colour of the lunar surface. Later we camped out in the desert, saw no more corpses, huddled together for emotional warmth. I hoped our deathcount program could verify the consequences of our initiation. In the pale earthglow it seemed almost futile; a waste of time. Erase and restart. Only...

This node has no door. I await sentence. Trial by statistical probability of neurones firing in order to precipitate havoc; jury is my own brain. Probable sentence is centerograde amnesia; no new memories recorded after crushing sense of guilt delivered. We live in an eternal present, huddled like ghosts against the vapour pressure of the past.

They probably cannot read my texts. I can expect no mercy for my identity. The dead are all dead, remain so, resurrection improbable due to cost. Many of them sheltered death-lust, but still considered murdered by courts. Theory worked, by the way. Kill-level approached hundredth percentile because of dome

systems collapse. We used overkill approach, brute force. A bit more finesse might have been a mitigating factor.

I see Jerzy sitting opposite me in this node, guilt rooted in his facial muscles like skin. The others are in a different category; we seem to be viewed as net-leaders.

I look at him, and he looks at me; I mouth, silently. "Judgment soon; want to bus?" He inclines his head. I transmit pulse this time, and we lock together in total fusion. Sense of completeness, love unnecessary. There's not much time. I think that the old are an alien species; their state of mind is unknowable, their perspective

— eternal.

Charles Stross wrote "The Boys" (IZ 22) and "In the Dream-Time" (IZ 26). One of the more promising young British writers to emerge in the last couple of years, he lives in Leeds and is now 25 years old.

COMMENT

Homage to Narcissus Charles Platt

Californians don't brag about it, but they tend to think of themselves as trend-setters. If it happens in California, they say, it'll happen in New York maybe five or ten years after that; and later still, it just might get through to the great unwashed masses who live their grubby lives in the middle of the country.

Californians were trend-setters in the 1960s when they started spurning American cars in favour of funny little Japanese imports. They initiated protests against American involvement in Vietnam. They built freeways, they were the first to roll back taxes in a protest against "big government," and they invented cosmic consciousness, personal growth, harmonic convergence, and microcomputers.

Knowing this, ever since I moved to Los Angeles six months ago I've been studying my environment with a sense of queasy anticipation. I've been looking for portents, straws in the wind, intimations of doom. And I've experienced some moments of revelation.

The first revelation came when I realized that three topics of conversation eclipse all others in this fash-

ion-conscious fantasy-land: food, clothes, and family.

True, there's nothing very unusual about topic number three; most idle gossip, in any state or nation, concerns friends and relatives. But how much can you really find to say about the stuff you eat and the things you wear?

Well, one food 'n' clothes conversation, during a visit with some friends in suburbia, lasted for most of a week. The participants were female, but I've heard males equally engrossed discussing different brands of acid-washed jeans or where to find authentic sushi (or enchiladas, or exotic ice cream, or imported beer, or natural-flavoured gourmet jelly beans).

The food 'n' clothes obsession is just one manifestation of a general concern with extensions of Self, and has been facilitated by three social developments: wealth (which creates a concomitant need to spend ostentatiously), mobility (any restaurant or store within thirty miles is eligible for a quick visit), and shopping malls (a haven where the process of buying things ceases to be a chore and becomes, instead, a magic quest, like wandering through the pages of an enormous gift

catalogue).

And what, you say, does this have to do with science fiction?

I'll get to that in a moment.

My second revelation came when I realized that apart from occasional journeys to shopping malls and restaurants, Southern Californians spend most of their time at home, seduced by \$3 video rentals and thirty channels of cable TV (especially the Home Shopping Network, which offers uninterrupted mail-order ads twenty-four hours a day).

Even if you're "single and looking," you don't have to leave your home to find a list of compatible prospects. If you have a computer with a modem (as many middle-class Californians do) you can simply dial your local electronic bulletin board and enter "chat mode," communicating keyboard-to-keyboard with strangers scattered across the city.

Every member of a singles-oriented bulletin board has a personality profile online, derived from answers to a list of preliminary questions. Some of the questions are obvious (age, gender, sexual orientation, weight). Some are

uniquely Californian – such as what model of car you drive, and your waist measurement in inches.

"What are your favourite TV programmes?" was the question that reaped the longest and most passionate responses in one of the boards I investigated. But "What do you like to read?" wasn't so popular. Many respondents claimed they had no time to read at all. Others mentioned a few magazines.

No one – not one person – mentioned books.

If you can use a computer, you have to be minimally literate. Yet these citizens of a country that still spends more on education, per capita, than any other nation, do not read books.

True, Los Angeles is Image City. The presence of Hollywood permeates the social fabric, much as the presence of the U.S. government permeates Washington DC, or the presence of the Mersey permeates Liverpool. Stardom, in Los Angeles, is not an abstract concept. Many people look as if they are playing roles synthesized from their favourite movies.

But still – no books?

The bulletin boards have huge libraries of software online, which anyone can download. They also have libraries of text contributed by members – mostly sexual fantasies, or lame little stories. But on the boards that I checked, the software outnumbers the text, byte for byte, by a ratio of more than twenty-to-one. Evidently, members find text a lot less interesting than video games.

One board did have a special-interest public-access channel dealing with science fiction. But almost all the comments related to movies and TV shows.

Some other straws in the wind: There is only one serious book publisher of any size in Los Angeles. It specializes in New Age and self-improvement guides. Other publishers do exist, but they mainly produce pornographic magazines.

J. Neil Schulman, a science-fiction writer, tried to establish a system called "Soft-Serv," offering computer users the ability to download new novels by their favourite authors at half the cost of a hardcover. Schulman has had no success promoting his idea.

An evening class teaching how to write science fiction, fantasy, and horror was offered through UCLA, one of the largest universities in the world. It failed to draw the minimum twelve students.

The local library in my Los Angeles suburb (a wealthy area just west of Beverly Hills) is smaller than the library in my drab little home town of Letchworth, in Hertfordshire. And its stock is inferior.

Most bookstores in Los Angeles are the U.S. equivalent of W.H. Smith and

Sons. Personal growth, health, business, and humour books are given prime display space, alongside cassette tapes of famous actors reading abridged versions of bestselling novels. A writer such as Kurt Vonnegut is regarded as "intellectual"; his work is tucked away in the back, not under "Fiction," but under "Literature" – meaning, books that aren't easy to read.

Actor Eddie Murphy (I am told by a friend who collects Hollywood gossip) doesn't read his own scripts. He has someone read them to him. It's easier that way.

And so on.

What does it all add up to? I'm not absolutely sure, but I have some suspicions.

The Good Life (which is as good, here, as one can possibly imagine) facilitates and fosters indulgence. Self-denial, here, is not a virtue; it is about as unattractive as self-mutilation. Sensuality – pampering the Self – is an industry; and the mind is treated as an extension of the body. For physical fitness, you sit on your rowing machine, or you run on your motorized treadmill, watching TV in the privacy of your living room, whose lush decor is a reflection of your fantasy Self. For a mental recharge you listen to restful New Age music on stereo headphones, or you meditate, or you watch a movie on The Movie Channel. Nothing too jarring; we want gentle massage of body and soul, not shock treatment. In this serene utopia, the biggest enemy, most commonly cited, is "stress."

Some grim facts of life are hard to eradicate. But we can find ways to deny them. The aging process, for instance: Los Angelenos simply pretend that it doesn't exist. I frequently see women in their sixties or seventies stepping out of red sports cars wearing fluorescent skin-tight pant-suits, pancake makeup, and elaborately coiffed platinum-blonde wigs. Beverly Hills is a global centre for plastic surgery. Vitamins (a crucial aid in the crusade against "stress") occupy seven shelves, each twelve feet long, in my local supermarket. Tanning salons help to perpetuate the illusion of health (while leading ultimately to skin cancers and the "Wrinkled Reagan" look – but we won't think about that).

In this culture where so many concerns are directed inward, it's no accident that one of the most successful new magazines of the 1980s is titled *Self*.

Narcissism rules. National politics, the homeless, traffic jams, smog, earthquakes – we don't want to think about them, and we don't have to, because they are elsewhere, outside the Self. Even when we travel, the car is an extension of the Self, and it protects us from the environment, which is why

Los Angelenos would rather commute on hideously overcrowded highways, one person per car, than share their automobiles or (horror!) use public transport.

Sunshine, elevator music, food, clothes – we can enjoy them, because they feel good and they meld with our materialist utopia; but even they are mere accessories, secondary to Self. Friendships are notoriously hard to establish in Los Angeles, and we all complain about this, but we don't do much about it, because, well, other people are so much trouble. "Enough about you; let's talk about me." That's an old Los Angeles joke, but like most jokes, it reflects a social truth.

Under these circumstances, it's obvious why we prefer magazines to books (if we bother to read at all). Magazines are totems of the Good Life. They reinforce narcissism with glamorous advertising and lightweight articles about movie stars, vacation resorts, food, and clothes. Books, however, violate this isolationist nirvana. Even a trashy Hollywood novel may contain nasty surprises – characters who overdose on drugs, rich people who lose everything they own. As for science fiction – weirdness! Hideous creatures, space warfare, ecodoom! Who needs that?

Yes, I am using broad generalities. There are, I am sure, exceptions. And people in San Francisco will object that most of my commentary applies only to those in Southern, as opposed to Northern, California.

Still, you can see the insidious effects radiating out into American culture. Los Angeles is, after all, the nation's entertainment capital; in these sunny climes are born escapist, fantasies propagated by all three television networks. And many of the most absurdly narcissistic fantasies (*Dallas*, *Miami Vice*) are subsequently distributed around the world.

No surprise, then, that science-fiction writers are being told by their editors that people don't want dystopian fiction, aren't interested in predictive near-future scenarios, would rather read about cute talking animals (i.e., pets – an extension of the Self) than complex characters with human problems. Fantasy outsells science fiction. Wish fulfilment (a form of narcissism) predominates.

And I myself am finding it contagious. Seduced by luxury and communications technology, I spend more and more time lolling in front of one screen or another. When I feel vaguely guilty because I don't know what's happening in the rest of the world, I catch up with ten minutes of video bites on the Headline News Network, because that's easier than trekking out to buy a news-

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John Gribbin

Other Edens

Breakout. The same sour taste at the back of the throat; the same pain through the head, like a skewer stuck through both eyes from side to side. Javed cursed, loud and long. He'd been crazy to take on this extra tour; but, by all that was holy, he'd never do it again. One more system after this, and he could go home. A quick scan, another jump, and that was it. For good.

"Looks like an oxygen planet, fourth from the sun."

The bright voice sent another wave of pain through his head.

"Lay off, Suzi. Give it a rest. I need something to straighten out my brain."

He fumbled past the accumulated debris of six months on board ship. The pills had to be here somewhere. He'd only put them down a couple of hours ago.

"Haven't you had enough of those?" Suzi had modulated her voice; now she sounded like a protective mother, not an over-eager Girl Guide leader. "You're not supposed to take more than four in a six-hour period, you know."

"Ah, c'mon." He'd found the bottle, and was busily stuffing three of the pills into his mouth. He'd only planned on taking two; the third was just to annoy Suzi. A sock floated past the console. "Waddayou know about anything, anyway? No pain circuits. Ought to stick some in. Make you a bit more human." He giggled.

Floating free in the centre of the cabin, he peered intently at the back of his left hand. The dark freckles appeared to be moving, crawling from right to left across his field of view. Hell, that was some stuff, all right. He reached for the edge of his bunk, but struck it only a glancing blow, and went into a slow spin. No coordination. Never mind. That's why he had Suzi to handle the ship. He was just the brains of the organization. Good old Suzi.

Hostility, like the pain, was washed away by the dope. He opened one eye, and watched the screen swim slowly past his field of view. There was a green bar shining brightly on the display. He knew it meant something important.

"Didya say ya found somethin', Suzi?"

"Yes Javed." The computer knew the necessity to speak slowly and carefully when her crew was under medication. "An oxygen planet. I've been running a full Lovelock on it. No question. A living Gaia, suitable for colonization."

Oh, shit, Javed thought. Just when I was ready to go home. Nothing but work, work, work. The third

this trip, out of eleven systems. The astronomers were getting too damned good at finding solar-type systems. He closed the open eye again. There was still one possible cop-out. He could dream, for a moment or two, before he had to ask.

The moment passed. He opened both eyes, and, sobering up slightly after the initial hit, reached out and caught the grab-bar by the console. "I don't suppose there's any problems about raw materials?"

"No problem, Javed." Suzi was back in Girl Guide mode. "Two gas giants. I've plotted a slingshot manoeuvre to take us past the bigger one and on to the Gaia with minimum use of energy. Ready when you are."

He groaned. "Just let me strap in, Suzi. Then its all yours."

The slingshot manoeuvre wasn't solely to save fuel, of course. As they passed the giant planet, they dropped a Turing onto its biggest moon. By the time Javed had checked out the Gaia and was on his way back out of the system, the idiot robot would already be building up its processing plant, ready to mine the hydrocarbon-rich atmosphere of the gas giant if the Gaia passed the final test.

Gloomily, Javed watched the screen as they orbited the planet one more time. Rules were rules. If there were signs of intelligent life, it was Hands Off. Any obvious signs, like electromagnetic transmissions, and he could up sticks and head off home now. But there never were any obvious signs. One hundred and forty-three known Gaias, and not a sign of intelligent life on any of them, except home. But rules were rules. If there were no signs obvious from orbit, he had to go down and look. With incorruptible Suzi on hand to report his every move when they got home, and the prospect of a fine that would wipe out his entire bonus if he didn't follow procedure.

"Procedure" meaning a week, minimum, crammed into a smelly sealed suit, drinking recycled water and with pipes stuck up all his personal orifices. If there was one other thing that was common to all the known Gaias, it was that they were lethal. Life from Earth couldn't survive on any of them; novel forms of complex biological compounds – living human tissue – were always under immediate attack from microbiological Gaians, and seldom lasted more than a day if unprotected. Which, of course, was why he was here. One hundred and forty-three Gaias found in less than fifty years, and none of them, yet, fit for human colonization.

Better get it over with. "Ready to suit up, Suzi. Take me down."

It had been every bit as bad as usual. Worse. Never, never, again, no matter how big a bonus they offered him. The tapes would certainly keep ecologists happy for years; commercial sales of the holos would probably be enough to pay for the whole damned expedition, giving the huddled masses on Earth a glimpse of an Eden that they could never visit.

He didn't have to replay the tapes. The images were still vivid in his mind. If he closed his eyes, he could see them, as real as if the planet were right in front of him. The beautiful blue ball, streaked with white clouds, that he'd watched from orbit had held truth in its promise.

He'd made first landing on a plain in the temperate zone, where the horizon seemed to stretch into infinity, startling herds of something that, from a distance, could have been mistaken for zebra. The similarities were no surprise. Evolution usually solved the same problems in much the same way. And if the creatures darting through the air above him, calling to each other in melodic tones, weren't actually covered in feathers, they were still birds in his book. The waterhole had made him begin to itch, even though he'd scarcely been in the suit for an hour. Something poked a snout and a pair of eyes above the water to take a look at him; smaller, brightly-coloured aquatic life forms darted through the water, scattering in frenzy when he tossed a rock into the pool. His body wanted nothing more than to shuck off the suit and dive into the cool, inviting water. His mind knew that, quite apart from the thing with the snout and eyes, it would be suicide.

Even the memory made him itch all over again. What the people in the habitats back home wouldn't give for a chance to walk under that blue sky across that plain, with no other human being in sight. Well, at least the tapes would give them that illusion, those that could afford it – an illusion that did not include suit itch. Opium for the people. He giggled again. Strictly against Suzi's advice, he'd dropped a couple of pills even before they had reached the orbit out of the gas giant. Serve those little bastards right, for all the trouble they'd put him to. Pissing about for days on end, recording this and reporting that. No obvious signs of intelligent life. That's what it said in the report, and that's what the tapes showed. The hair-splitters in their ivory towers would probably have a fine time arguing about the potential for intelligence shown by those upright lizards on the south continent, with big brains and opposable thumbs. But as far as Javed was concerned, they'd had their chance. All they had to do was build a simple radio transmitter, and he'd never have had to suit up and go down to look at them. He certainly didn't think it was very intelligent of them to throw rocks at someone who clearly represented an advanced, spacefaring civilization.

He felt the warm glow of a job well done, and of a moderate hit of IFT-90.

"How's the Turing, Suzi?"

"No problems, Javed. It's found all the raw materials it needs, and says it will be operational in less than a year."

"OK. Give it the green. All systems go. For the glory of humankind, and in the name of the Council of All Earth, and all that stuff."

An authorization code flashed over the comm laser that Suzi was using to talk to the Turing on the giant planet's moon. It was acknowledged. In less than a year from now, the magnetic launcher would begin propelling huge, light pods down into the gravitational well of the system's sun. Falling inward, on a carefully planned trajectory, each would impact the atmosphere of the Gaia, bursting open to release its cargo of modified hydrocarbons, mined from the atmosphere of the giant. Within a hundred years, the CFCs would have done their job, stripping ozone from the outer skin of the Gaia and allowing ultraviolet radiation to penetrate to the surface and wipe it clean of life. Then, the Turing could shut down operations. Within another couple of hundred years, the ozone layer would have recovered. There would be another sterile home for life awaiting the immigrants from Earth – another Eden for the home planet's huddled masses.

"Authorization transmitted. I guess it must make you rather proud, Javed, to know that you have personally initiated more Edens than any other pioneer."

Oh God, it was Girl Guide time again. He fumbled with the bottle, and popped another couple of pills into his mouth for good luck. "Sure, Suzi," he mumbled around them. "Proud to be a pioneer on behalf of the people of All Earth." Wow! The colours on the screen were ab-so-lute-ly amazing! "An' what's more..." his voice trailed off as he studied the back of his hand, where the hairs seemed to be moving in a complex spiral pattern. "...whass more, Suzi, it'll sure teach those li'l suckers not to throw rocks at me!"

Giggling quietly to himself, floating freely in the centre of the cabin and spinning gently as he watched the backs of his hands intently, the hero of the planetary pioneers headed out once more into deep space.

John Gribbin is well known as a popular-science writer, author of countless books on physics, climatology and a host of other subjects. He also contributes (very frequently!) to the *New Scientist*, the *Guardian* and other publications. About a decade ago he wrote a couple of science-fiction novels in collaboration with Douglas Orgill, and he has contributed various short stories to *Analog* magazine. Recently, he has relaunched his career as a writer of fiction, with the novel *Double Planet* (written with Marcus Chown) and the solo novel *Father to the Man* (forthcoming from Gollancz).

Stephen Gallagher

Interview by David V. Barrett

Valley of Lights is a very American book; you're not! So why are you writing an American cop horror story?

Good question! I was born in Salford, Lancashire. I worked in London for a while in the mid-70s, and now reside in the north-east of Lancashire, in the Ribble Valley. My first novel was *Chimera*, which was written in '78-79, published in 1982. That was set in the north of England, mostly in Cumbria, and was on territory that I knew. It was the first novel that I'd ever sold; I got very cocky on the basis of the sale: I'd got a good advance, and felt like a bit of a world-beater. I was a big fan of people like John Farris, Stephen King, Ira Levin, Thomas Tryon, and what I really wanted to do was emulate them, and do an American horror novel — which, in retrospect, seems a stupid thing to aspire to, but it was what I aspired to at the time.

It works very well; if I didn't know you were Lancashire, I'd have thought that the author of this was American.

Yeah, you're not the first person to say that! The secret to the style, it's just a trick really, is that it's not written in strong American. You can usually tell when a British writer is trying to do an American voice, because every other line is "Goddamn", and they try too hard. *Valley* is mostly written in the plainest of plain English.

Why have you set it in Phoenix?

Phoenix was a place which we travelled through in '78, the first time we ever went to the States; we were doing a kind of Greyhound bus and Amtrak tour of the country. We spent one night there. We arrived at about 10 o'clock at night, went to a motel, and our train was due to pull out at about 10 o'clock the next morning. So we saw virtually nothing of the town. But over the next two years, till 1980, the place just lingered in my mind. So when I got the advance for *Chimera*, I wanted to do this Great American Novel, as I thought it would be; what I did was split the advance down the middle, say there's half of it for living on when we get home, half of it for going over to the States, and we'll just stay as long as we can until it runs out.

We went back to Phoenix, spent three months there, and I did a lot of location research, living in the various parts of the city; I used to go out at night



on patrol with the police, made lots of friends in the force, and had a really good time. It's heavily researched, I made some really good notes, and then put these great notes next to this crappy little story idea that I'd gone out with... It was a serious learning process, not a humiliating one, but certainly a humbling one, because I realized how inappropriate the notion of trying to do the Great American Novel was when there are plenty of Americans out there far better qualified than I am to do it. And for literally five years the notes stayed on the shelf, with three different versions of the

story that I'd tried to get off the ground, none of which worked in any way. It actually came to the point where I had to xerox copies of the failed story and send them to the tax inspectors just to justify the write-off, and say Look, this was a business plan that didn't work.

Because the material was so great and so rich, I started to mine it for short stories. The first short story that I ever sold to Ed Ferman for *F&SF* was a thing called "Nightmare with Angel," which was set in Kingman, Arizona, which is one of the outlying towns about two or three hours drive away. So I was mining bits and pieces out of this for the

shorts, and in '84-85 – which were really rough years for me because I'd left one publisher, and my agent was not doing a lot of work on my behalf (this was just before I moved to Curtis Brown who are a different order of agency altogether) – I was having a tough year. I had an unsold novel on the shelf, which was *Oktoper*, and I was literally making my living for those two years from short-story sales and old Doctor Who royalties, and just bits and pieces that were still coming in. I needed a short story to send to Ed Ferman that I could sell and make the mortgage for next month.

I had what I thought was a really nice, neat self-contained little idea, which would do for 7-10,000 words. I thought, let's put it together with some of the Phoenix material, because I hadn't actually used any of the Phoenix central material – I'd used all the peripheral stuff from the outlying towns and that, but never the Phoenix material before – so I said Let's get this down and draw upon this, because you can't save it forever and you're obviously never going to do the big book that you thought you were going to do. For some strange reason when I put the two together, Bang, Fusion, and 20,000 words later I realized I wasn't doing a short story, I was doing a novel, and I was less than a third of the way through it. And this was the last thing I needed; I didn't need a novel, I needed a bloody short story to pay the rent. With a certain sense of resignation I carried on with it, because it had dictated itself, it was telling me what it needed to be, and I had little choice in the matter other than to write *Valley of Lights*, the novel.

How long did it take to write?

If you choose the starting point to be 1980 then it took five years; from actually sitting down at the processor to rolling the last page out of the printer, it took about 12 weeks. So it's either 12 weeks or five years, or any period in between. It was at this point that I moved to Curtis Brown, and took the manuscripts of *Oktoper* and *Valley of Lights* and a couple of other things that I'd done along with me and said Look, these are my unsold oeuvre, do you think you can do anything with them? And immediately Imogen Parker at Curtis Brown singled out *Valley of Lights* as a really commercial proposition. She knew that NEL had recently been taken over by Hodder & Stoughton, and that Hodders were looking to rebuild the NEL line which had become a little bit run down over recent years. They were looking for new authors to join the authors who were already in it, and she thought that I would fit right in there. So NEL was actually the first place that it was submitted to, and they offered straight away.

Going back to the beginning, before *Chimera* wasn't there a novel based on a Radio Manchester programme? That would be *The Last Rose of Summer* which was the first thing I ever did, back in '78. That was my sort of apprenticeship and introduction to writing all round. *The Last Rose of Summer* was a six-part serial, the first professional sale I ever made.

How did you get into writing for radio from scratch? There are millions of people trying to do that...

Well, in 1977-78 the local radio stations were about seven years into the franchise, and the franchises were coming up for renewal. Just about every radio station in their franchise application had promised that they were going to do speech content, classical music, and drama. Classical music's easy enough because you just bang on a few Deutsche Gramophon discs... But drama takes creative input and money. And none of this had really been attempted before. I was working at Granada at the time, and I had a mate who worked in the commercial production department at Piccadilly Radio, and he said, Look, there's a need here – do you fancy having a crack at it? I'd always had these unformed ambitions and intentions to write, and the only thing I'd ever really put together was an entry for a competition run by the old *Science Fiction Monthly* magazine. The story that I did got nowhere, it vanished without trace. It had the germ of what I thought was a good idea in it; it turned out that it wasn't an original idea by any means, it was a retread of every adolescent boy's fantasy which becomes their first science-fiction novel. When you actually look at it dispassionately you realize that Orwell told exactly the same story of one guy against the oppressive regime, far better, more maturely, and more intelligently, in 1984. But it's strange, how you can write the same archetypes over and over again and not realize that you're not being as original as you think you are.

What I did was a half-hour first episode of proposed six-part, and we took it into the commercial production studio and we would borrow actors who were doing commercial voiceovers, just to read odd parts, and then get the razorblade and sellotape out at the end of the day and splice scenes up out of all the various parts we had. When we had that pilot episode, we took it to the programme controller and played it to him, and he said Great, do it. He gave us a minuscule budget. I think I made about £200, it might even have been as little as £100, out of the whole thing. But I wasn't unhappy, simply because it gave me a professional start, and I was getting paid for something, and I had deadlines. I was

going to work with professional actors in an actual professional studio, even though most of the actors that we were working with mostly got to do voice-over work and were really glad of the chance to do some actual acting for a change, and most of the technicians were the people who put the breakfast show and the Piccadilly hit parade out on Sundays, and they had no drama experience either. We were all learning together.

We did three serials, one after another; there. In a sort of fit of creative inspiration, I took the outlines around one or two publishers. One of the publishers that responded was Corgi, and as a result of that *The Last Rose of Summer* came out. It wasn't exactly a novelization, it was a semi-novelization – it used a lot of the radio material, but it also used a lot of the material that I'd intended to use when it was going to be a novel before it was ever a radio serial, so it was a weird twilight hybrid of novel and novelization. It ran about 70,000 words, and it hung together as a book even though it wasn't the most dazzling thing in the world. I realized in the course of doing it that I'd found the one and only thing that I loved doing in the world, because up until that point I'd been an ambitious kid but the ambitions had no particular form or direction, and if you'd asked me what I wanted to do I'd say Yes, I want to be Stanley Kubrick, and I want to do this and I want to do that, but – I suddenly realized Yes, I want to learn to write, and I want to write well.

So there's *The Last Rose of Summer*, *Chimera*, *Valley of Lights* and *Oktoper*...

There's also *Follower* in there, which was my 1984 book, which sold so few copies that it might as well be a lost work. It came onto the market and sort of died on the spot; they sold literally seven-and-a-half thousand copies in the country; that was the accounting that I got. It's available in Germany at the moment, the only place that it's in print. I'm hoping, fairly soon, to get it back into print. Because the funny thing is, nobody liked anything I'd done all that much, certainly not enough to gamble big bucks on it, until *Valley of Lights* came out; and now everybody seems to like everything I've ever done, including the stuff they didn't like before!

How long have you been full-time? Since 1980. Short stories for that two-year period, but in there I've also had radio plays: I did about half a dozen "Saturday Night Theatres", I've done a couple of the "Fear on Four" series, I did an H.G. Wells adaptation of *The Wonderful Visit*...

So "Saturday Night Theatres" pay a damn sight better than short stories? This is true, because what you get is

the Monday afternoon repeat, where you get 60% of the fee all over again for no extra work. So if you're bright you target on "Saturday Night Theatre" rather than "Afternoon Theatre" which gets no repeat whatsoever. I'm not sure what the rate is at the moment, but I think when you count the repeat in as well it could be over £3,000. So it's well worth doing; it's better than some book advances that you can get offered! And of course also in there were the two Doctor Who seasons that I did, which were life-savers in a way.

Tell me about *Doctor Who*.

Frustrating experience. They start off by telling you, No restrictions, be as

imaginative as you like. Then you hand the first draft in and they say, Oh, we can't do this, oh no we can't do that, and Oh, we can't show that – can you put it in the dialogue? And then further down the line, after this has happened on two or three drafts, the script editor sharpens his pencil and starts rewriting your dialogue – usually at the point when the script is about to be typed up by the BBC typist, so you don't see it until it's been virtually set in stone and handed out to everyone. And one of the basic rules of being a BBC Doctor Who script editor is that you have to have a tin ear for dialogue or you don't get the job. So alien cultures and anybody from history always talks in this kind of cod-pseudo-Shakespearian language. People say things like, if they don't understand something, "I do not understand," and if they don't know something they say "I do not know," or you write a line like "They must think we're stupid" and it comes out back from the typist as "They must think us fools."

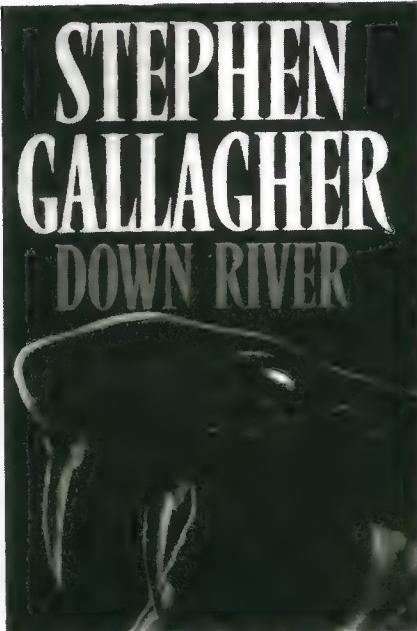
Tell me about your novelization of the *Warrior's Gate* episodes of *Doctor Who*.

There is actually a lost version of *Warrior's Gate*, which is the first draft of the novel that I handed in, which Target were incredibly pleased with, and were prepared to increase the print run and also increase the page count. This was because I was using a lot of the material in the first draft that the script editor had lost, had written out or changed. I thought, This is my chance to tell the story in a coherent fashion, because I didn't think that the TV screen version was anything like as coherent as it could have been. Everything was all going great guns, then about four days before it was due to go to the typesetter, word came back from the production office that they weren't going to pass it. They insisted on seeing all the manuscripts, and felt that the manuscript had diverged too far from the screen version, and so they wouldn't permit it. I had to do a very fast and furious rewrite and paste-up job to bring the manuscript a bit closer to the screen version. It still isn't iden-

tical; I managed to salvage a few things in there, and the producer kind of raised an eyebrow and noted that it was in there but did not actually block it this time. But somewhere there may still be a xerox of that original manuscript, the first draft of *Warrior's Gate*. I would be interested to see it, because my copy of the draft, of course, got destroyed by the haste of the rewrite, so I wasn't able to keep copies, and this was pre-wordprocessor days, so it was a literal cut-and-paste job.

Would you do any more TV writing – TV sf?

Yeah, but the condition that I would most like to write under now is that it would have to be original material and



not working with somebody else's characters, and not working on somebody else's serial. It probably wouldn't be sf; it would probably be more in the mould of the creative mentor that I think I have in what I'm doing now, more like Nigel Kneale, the Quatermass guy – the contemporary suspense narrative, with the weird element worked through to its logical end; that interface between the weird and the commonplace which is where I think the real interest lies.

I was going to ask you about that. *Valley* is definitely a horror novel; *Chimera* was sf horror; *Rose* was, casting my mind back, fairly straight sf. What are you? Horror writer, sf writer, fantasy writer?

A continually mutating being, I think, because the one that you don't know in there, *Follower*, is a straight supernatural. My latest novel, *Down River*, can be read on one level as a straight mainstream thriller. As soon as someone hangs a label on me it becomes automatically inaccurate. I think I'm basically a genre-crossover writer; the genre doesn't exist which quite fits me.

I don't mind what kind of label the publishers put on it; I see their job as delivering the reader to page one, by whatever means they feel is most appropriate, by whatever means ingenuity and advertising budget will permit. And from page one onwards it's my job to keep them there until the end. The publishers seem to respect the division there; at no point have they ever tried to tell me what I ought to be writing next, what they would like to be seeing from me. They're not nudging me in any direction, saying If you would do it this way it would sell more. They're absolutely great from that point of view. And I try not to be over-interfering, saying Well look, we ought to be doing this, we ought to be doing that. They give me input into stuff like covers, they give me a look at blurbs, but as I always point out the last word in that kind of field is theirs. It's something in which I have no training, no experience, and though I may have strong opinions they're as likely to be misplaced opinions as not.

What do you see yourself doing over the next four or five years?

The gameplan for the next few years is: *Chimera* has been sold for TV to Zenith; nothing has been said, but I wonder whether it's in a little bit of doubt at the moment, because the Beeb have come out with a thing called *First Born*, which is substantially the same kind of story, and overlaps in so many areas, and knowing how volatile the movie business and the TV business are, it could just kick the pins from underneath that project. But it was a long shot, it was an early work that I never expected to get sold into TV. It's the first time I've ever been accepted on first draft for the scripts; the way

that the deal was structured I was to get so much on commencement of first draft, so much on delivery, so much on commencement of second draft, and so much on delivery of second draft. When they saw the first draft they paid the whole lot in one go, and said they were perfectly happy with it as it stood. The next thing will be the writer/director conferences, and there will be a third draft as a result of that, which is inevitable. I've been paid for what I've done, I've been paid for the option, I can't complain. It would be nice to see it happen, but I certainly don't intend to cry if it doesn't, because it's forces beyond my control.

Also we're just in the process of sewing up the deal on *Oktober*, which is going to be a four-parter film for TV, a mini-series. *Down River* has been optioned, and the option covers both theatrical cinema release and TV; it depends entirely on what they decide to do with the material. But they were so taken with the first two that Margaret Matheson, who is the head of Zenith, actually okayed the option of

Down River without even reading it, just on the recommendation of Scott and Archie, the two guys who are the commissioning editors there.

Writing is not always rosy; at times you must get discouraged and depressed... Do you get encouragement from other writers – or from hearing their tales of woe?

You get commiseration, which is as valuable as encouragement. You have to be really driven by the work. You can't be driven by desire for money because that will just wreck your performance –

You become a hack.

That's it, yeah, and by doing that you more or less guarantee that you won't ever hit the big time, because a hack has to do three books a year for very low money each book, and never has time to focus his vision and actually think: Well, do I have a personal point of view on the world, and how can I best exploit it? You've got to be work-driven. I always think of a play by Trevor Griffiths, *The Comedians*, where you've got this old guy who has been through the business and is giving night-school classes to these young hopefuls, and one of the guys says, Well, what's wrong with wanting to be rich? And the guy says, There's nothing wrong with wanting to be rich, but you've got to want to be good before you want to be rich, because you'll never be good afterwards. It's like when I was in the audience at a TV interview with Shirley Conran just after *Lace* had come out, and it was kind of Maggie Thatcher-bestsellerdom all the way down the line; the interviewer was taking quite a hard line with her, virtually saying This book is crap, and Shirley Conran and her agent were both on this show, and her agent cut in and said, Yes, but now she's written this which is going to make her so much money, she's free to write whatever she wants as a personal artist afterwards. So what does she write? She writes *Lace II* and *Savages*. And that pattern has been repeated again and again and again, and will always be repeated. You've got to be driven by the love of the work itself and not the love of the contract.

So you couldn't do what some of writers do, which is churn out a couple of hack works a year under pseudonyms, and also work on what they actually want to do?

I'm unable to hack in that kind of way. I've done novelizations before now, and I find them incredibly frustrating experiences because you find yourself with a piece of crap that you wouldn't even watch on television, and you're given the script to novelize, and you find that you're still trying to bring the same kind of pressure to do well to that piece of prose that has got to be delivered in five weeks' time or whatever,

and if anything it's harder.

What about turning it the other way around: writing screenplays?

Writing screenplays is a dream, really, because you've spent a year on the book, and the screenplay you can write in three or four weeks. The tough part of a screenplay is getting the balance of the story right, then Wham! – you get the flow of incidents. A screenplay is if anything closer to stream of consciousness because you see the thing in your head, and there are so few damn words in a screenplay that virtually as you see it in your head it's on the page.

What about a screenplay of someone else's work?

The only time I've ever adapted somebody else's work is *The Wonderful Visit* by H.G. Wells, and that was for radio. That was slightly exceptional, because Wells wrote the thing mainly in dialogue, it was just about the right length, needed very little structural alteration from me, and when the thing got a lot of critical praise, which it did, and also was hugely well liked within the BBC, I was pleased for HG, because it was virtually none of my effort at all. And of course you collect less money when you do an adaptation, so there was no sort of feeling of moral shame about it.

I was talking to Bill Gibson some months ago, and he at the moment is making what he called "obscene amounts of money" from writing Hollywood screenplays...

Yeah, there are obscene amounts of money out there, especially if you're a name, and even if you're not a name then compared to the £2,000 book advance the money from a screenplay is bloody hefty. But it breaks down in certain ways: they break it down so they don't have to pay it you all at once,

and there's always a cut-off point at some place, so if the movie doesn't get made then you don't see the obscene amounts of money, you just see the faintly disgusting amounts of money. But you would burn out very quickly if you made that the centre and focus of your career; it would be like continuous diet of no protein. I feel that you have to have the prose writing as the spine of a career, and then screen work is something that you can venture out and do to get wider recognition, to find yourself working as a writer but in an interacting social context. Every time that you enter a project you hope that you won't get the frustrations that you did on the last one.

I think I'm now up to draft nine of *Valley of Lights*. The first three drafts stuck closely to the book; subsequent drafts started drifting away from the book, and at a very late stage somebody realized that what they had was not as good as the book, and now what I seem to be doing all the time is grabbing

pages out of the earlier discs and pasting them back into the script so that it will now start to resemble script three a lot more again. This is a tremendously frustrating process, because you've got to go along to meetings with all these people, and you've got to respect their input even though you know that it ain't gonna work. And sometimes you've got to write scenes that you know ain't gonna work because you've got to satisfy people, you've got to show that they don't work on the page. Nobody else is going to admit that they don't work, it becomes the writer's fault then, and you've got to be able to swallow that and carry on, in order to know that something you could actually feel proud of is going to make it on to the screen. And in fact you don't have control onto the screen, you have control over the scripts as long as you've got your words going onto the paper, but as soon as the thing goes onto the studio floor, it is out of your hands altogether.

What do you read?

At the moment I'm really into Jonathan Carroll; he's one of the writers that I most respect. There's an American writer called John Farris who I'm a kind of completist about; if I'm in the States I go around American bookstalls picking up these crappy 1960s paperbacks of his really early work. He did *The Fury*, *All Heads Turn When the Hunt Goes By*, *When Michael Calls*, the latest one I think is *Wildwood*. Ira Levin, who did *Rosemary's Baby* and a much-neglected book called *A Kiss before Dying*, which is one of the best plotted books I have ever read; him I respect a lot. British writers: Chris Priest, his last couple of books I thought were terrific: *The Glamour...* **Actually he's not writing straight sf, he's writing borderline...**

This is it, yeah, and I think this is catching something in the tone of the time. Rob Holdstock's *Mythago Wood* as well I thought was terrific; what really makes that book for me is this wonderful juxtaposition of ancient England and the Wood, against the guy whom comes back from the war. It's like all the texture of a Ridley Scott *Hovis* advert...!

Stephen Gallagher's books are published in the UK by New English Library (Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.)

Jamil Nasir

Not Even Ashes

If I hadn't liked garbage dumps, I would never have seen her.

I had a cabin on a Titan III transport that took 87 days to carry 1000 people and 50,000 tons of aluminium from Callisto to Earth. I spent most of my time in the ship bars, but down the passage from my cabin was a maintenance hatch, and below that a garbage port that dumped every 48 hours. The hatch was kept locked, but in my job lock-decoding implants are standard equipment. Drinking helps ship claustrophobia, but there's nothing like watching a big gravity wheel drop garbage into infinite emptiness.

That's how it was that 85 days out from Callisto, two days before we docked at Rupert Sheldrake Station, I lay on the humming metal floor of a dark, deserted passageway with my face against a tiny viewport. The inside of the garbage bay was lit dim red. That's when I saw her.

At first there was a white blur not far from the viewport. After a while it started to look like a face, a woman's face with the eyes closed, wedged into a jumble of plastic containers. I squinted at it, trying to see a scrap of garbage instead of a face. A smaller blur next to what looked like the face started to look like a hand. A cold feeling went through me.

A blue light marked the bay emergency hatch. My watch said four minutes until dump time: it took one and a half of those to break the hatch lock. When the hatch slid open the blue light turned red and started to blink.

A metal ladder went down into garbage. I half fell down it and tried to stand on a jumble of jagged scrap metal, breathing sour refuse oil fumes. I took a few steps, fell through a hole, climbed out, took a few more steps, and was almost standing on the face. It was a face, asleep or dead, not moving. I grabbed the hand that was near it and pulled.

An alarm horn blared and the red light filling the bay flashed.

The woman's body was limp. I dragged it to the ladder, got it over my shoulders. A rusty screeching was the bay doors starting to move; garbage shifted under my feet. Twelve weeks of drinking hadn't done my physique any good, but I went up that ladder like a spacer. The emergency hatch had closed automatically for pressure lock, but there was a manual release. Air whistled past me as I struggled through. I flipped the hatch shut, heard the rumble of the port opening, the roar of air exploding into vacuum. My heart was pounding. The woman slumped on the floor in front of me looked dead and wasn't wearing any clothes.

She wasn't breathing either. I carried her up metal stairs to the passenger level. There was no one around, just a metal tunnel that seemed to slope upward in both directions. It was geomagnetic night-time aboard ship, and everybody who wasn't sleeping was in the bars, restaurants, and stimudromes topside. There's nothing else to do in outer space.

With the woman on my bunk and me standing over her, there was barely room to close my cabin hatch. She lay with her head flopped back, chalk white and inert, a couple of passive-breathing spacesuit jacks showing under her arms. I got the nozzle of my first-aid epinephrine inhaler into her mouth, pressed the button. The inhaler made noise and her chest arched. I took it away and she seemed to sigh, her chest relaxing again. I did the same thing again, then a third time. She lay still, refusing to be alive.

"God damn you," I told her. She took a deep breath by herself.

I gave her another jolt and she almost jumped off the bunk.

"Easy," I said, holding her shoulders. She stared at me with wild eyes.

"What is it?" she gasped. "What's happening?"

"You're all right. Take it easy. I'm going to get you a doctor."

She started to cry. She looked scared.

I let go of her with one hand, typed an access code on the bunk console.

"Wait," she rasped. She seemed suddenly dizzily awake, wary. "What - How did I get here?"

"I brought you. As a matter of fact, I found you in a garbage bay."

"You're a ship employee?" she asked weakly, lying back on the pillow. Epinephrine wears off fast.

"No. Lady, it's time for the doctor."

"Please don't call anyone." I stared at her. She looked back with pleading, fading eyes. She grabbed my hands clumsily. "Please don't tell them about me. I'll tell you why..." Her hands trembled. "Please. Please. Promise?" Her eyes crossed, closed, and she was asleep.

Don't ask me why I didn't call the doctor - or the ship police. Maybe I'm too used to breaking rules - after all, that's my job. I just sat on the edge of the bunk and looked over her muscular, moon-gravity-thin body, paper-white skin, dark blue hair. Other than the passive-breathing jacks she showed no signs of endogenous hardware. She was scraped and cut

from lying in the garbage bay, and there was an injection mark on her left forearm. That made me think a while. Finally I rolled her under the covers, turned off the light and went out.

You had to shove to get through the crowds on the entertainment deck. There was the smell of opium, sweat, spicy food, the babble of voices, music. Twelve weeks in a space transport makes people celebrate just to stay alive. After a few drinks I got tired of being jostled. I shuffled back to my cabin, turned off the light, and lay on the floor with a wadded-up jacket for a pillow.

When I woke up next day period the woman was still asleep, but she had a pulse and her skin had some colour. I took a shower. When I was back in the cabin knotting a tie, a sudden movement made me turn.

She had dragged herself upright in bed, trying to open her eyes, panic fighting drugged sleepiness in her face. When I came close she lifted her arm as if to ward off a blow, tears running down her cheeks.

I retreated to the vendor console and thumbprinted the credit panel, ordered ersatz coffee with double caffeine. It took some coaxing to get her to sip from the steaming plastic cup; but it did her good; soon she could hold the cup herself. Her large, black eyes slowly got awake and sane – but not happy.

"What time is it?" she asked, rubbing her face. "What day is it?" Her voice was hoarse.

"10:10 am SGT, Tuesday. When did you go to sleep?"

"I don't remember exactly. I'm hungry."

"We'll eat. As soon as we clear up some business."

I watched her wary eyes turn sleepy. She lay back in the bunk and stretched so that I could see her breasts and the strong, lean line of her stomach.

"I'm feeling drowsy," she said. "Probably after-effects of the... Couldn't we...?"

"Sure." I punched the vendor again, sat on the edge of the bunk with another cup of coffee. She made no move to take it.

"Sorry to interrupt you," I said. "You were about to tell me who tried to kill you and why, and why you don't want to see a doctor, and whether I'm going to get in trouble keeping you here. Lady, I'm counting the seconds before I get on the horn to the ship cops."

She sat up, panting with fear. "No – not now. You've got to trust me. As soon as we get to Earth and I'm safe, I'll tell you. I promise. There'll be reward money..."

I shook my head. "Those endo lie-detector rigs are out of my price-range, lady. Suppose you're a gangster or a smuggler that got double-crossed. Then the Earth cops ask me, 'Mr Karmade, is it your normal procedure, when you find people stripped and doped and tossed in garbage bays, to conceal them and fail to inform the authorities?' 'No sir, but she told me she would explain everything, and there was reward money, and she spread out on the bunk in such an appealing way—'"

She jumped up and slapped me across the face. It hurt. When I had wiped the water out of my eyes she was standing in front of me, glaring. But when I started to type my console access code, she said, "Wait."

She sat back down on the bunk, gathering blankets around her as if she was cold. After a while she started to talk. Her voice was low, controlled. "Maybe you

heard about the disturbances on Callisto."

"Rumours. Power blackouts, a plant at Buri impact basin closing temporarily. Nothing on the video. I was at Ottar, and there was no trouble there."

"There wasn't anything on the video. We kept it off the video and out of the production reports, arrested survivors from the plants that were attacked to keep them from talking. The System Government doesn't want publicity, not yet. We don't know exactly what's happening, but it looks like a full-scale Zagreb rebellion. All the plants in the Southern Hemisphere are closed – two were completely destroyed. Troop carriers are on their way from Earth. All transmissions are being monitored by jamming satellites. Production reports are being faked for the closed plants. Travel to the Southern Hemisphere is suspended. Unofficially, of course."

"I was part of an InterPol intelligence team that came out two transports ago, when the first disturbances were reported. Six of us took mining jobs at plants where there had been incidents. I was in Lodurr when it was overrun. I hid at the bottom of a mine-shaft for two days. I'm carrying information vital to the defence of the System."

"To the defence of the System?" I said, surprised. "What can a few devil-worshippers in old-fashioned spacesuits possibly –"

"I thought the same until I saw them at Lodurr. There are more than we thought, a lot more. They're getting modern equipment from somewhere. And they brought – things – with them. Strange machines. At least I think they're machines." She shuddered suddenly, and looked into my eyes.

I studied her. "If you're with InterPol," I said after a while, "the ship cops aren't going to bother you. They'll fight each other to kiss your ass."

"The Zagrebs have agents on this ship. We knew that when we boarded. We didn't think they'd try anything on a System vessel, but three of them grabbed me two nights ago, searched my cabin, interrogated me. The last thing I remember is getting some kind of shot in the arm. They must have dumped me in the garbage bay where you found me. If they think I'm dead it suits me fine. I don't want them to try me again. It's not likely they have informants on the ship police, but it's not impossible. If you hide me for two more days, until we dock at Rupert Sheldrake, there'll be reward money when I reach Los Angeles headquarters." Suddenly her voice broke. "The things they did to me..."

I watched her while she trembled and cried. When she was quieter, I said, "It's a nice story. If it's true."

Her voice was shaky. "There are two men in Cabin 804 – Jeth Andro and Yusef Gradenko – from my InterPol team. Only the three of us are still alive. Tell them I sent you. Tell them what happened. But don't let the Zagrebs follow you."

Cabin 804 was halfway around the wheel from mine. I waited until the passage was empty, then knocked.

There was no answer, no sound but the deep endless hum of the transport. The inside of the cabin was blanketed with scrambler waves that jangled my surveillance earpiece – but I had a hunch. It took me thirty seconds to break the door lock. Inside, it was

dark and silent. I switched on the light.

There were two men in the cabin. One of them had thinning brown hair and a hooked nose. He lay peacefully on the lower bunk, wearing pyjamas, covers pulled up to his chest. It was hard to tell what the other man looked like: he lay crumpled by the shower door, naked, and there was a lot of dried blood on him.

I moved slowly to the man in the bunk. His right temple was a blackened crater, and there was blood on his pillow. I crouched over the man on the floor. His left eye was a deep, crisped hole.

I went through the cabin. In the breast pocket of a corfam jacket was an I.D. holomod that projected the image of the man on the bed. The image said: "My name is Yusef I. Gradenko, InterPol System Detail three -"

I wandered among the crowds on the entertainment deck until processors in my surveillance package signalled that there was no one shadowing me. Then I took a circuitous route back to my cabin.

The woman was crouched in the shower cubicle, and didn't come out until I had the door shut.

"What did they say?" she asked anxiously. "Why did it take you so long?"

"Your friends are dead," I said. She searched my eyes. Then she sat on the bunk.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"How?" Her voice was ashen.

"Spark-cut. Expert work."

She nodded slowly. After a while she looked at me.

"You'll let me stay here?"

"Yes."

She nodded again.

I argued with the cabin vendor, then finally got a bottle of liquor and a set of cheap unisex clothes. The woman took the clothes into the shower cubicle, slid the door shut. Atomized water hissed. I filled two glasses with medicinal-smelling green liquid. When she came out I was on my second glass.

The cheap jumpsuit made her look beautiful somehow. She picked up her glass, smelled it, drank it suddenly. I filled it again. She sat down. We looked at nothing and drank.

After a while I asked: "How did you happen into Off-Planet Intelligence? That's rough work."

"I was born on Callisto. It's my home. Earth is off-planet to me."

"That's a little unorthodox for an InterPol agent, isn't it? I thought Earth was supposed to be Home Planet."

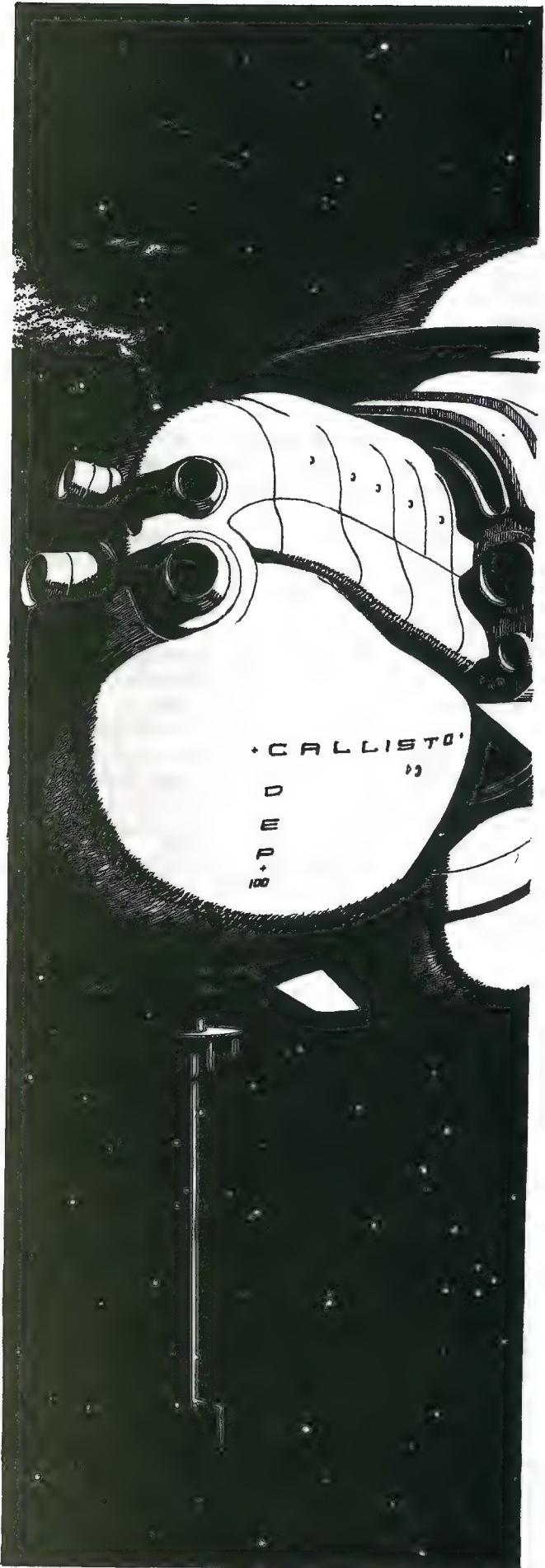
She shrugged. "I never saw Earth until I was fifteen. I know my way around Callisto. The Agency needs people who know their way around Callisto. Simple as that."

"Tell me about living there. I spent three months in a tin shack and almost went crazy. On Earth you can go outside and breathe, at least."

"You can live outside the huts indefinitely if you learn to run a fusion-powered spacesuit. I spent two months outside once. It's beautiful — clear, brilliant, dark. Earth is steamy, crowded, the sun too bright. Jupiter is our sun — a big, soft, coloured light. Your sun is our moon."

"You talk like a Zagreb."

She shrugged. "Everybody on Callisto is a little bit Zagreb. The difference is that we know we need Earth



Illustrations by Martin Perrott

to survive. The Zagrebs think Callisto could be self-sufficient, independent."

"And they worship something that's not from Earth. Something they found on Callisto."

"They worship the Void. The infinite nothingness. The emptiness that goes on forever. Something we on Callisto are born looking at."

Her voice sank. "Earth people are like hothouse plants. You can't see out and you don't want to see out. I spent a year on the Neptune Orbiter, a tiny lighted space in the infinite night. The sun there is a bright star, no more. Daylight there is darker than the darkest night on Earth. With the cabin lights out I could look through the port and see Neptune, huge and green and white, rolling through the night, secret, frozen, gigantic; and looking away from the planet, there was nothing — blackness, emptiness, silence — me floating in it — never ending —"

"People aren't made to see such things."

She looked at me as if surprised I was still there. "People are made to see all sights, all visions," she said.

After that we drank a lot. I tried to keep the conversation going. Her parents had been miners on Callisto. Her mother had died there. I told her about going into the New York Warrens as a rookie policeman. My head felt big and hot. She had been on low-orbital reconnaissance over Neptune. Her black eyes were huge, luminous, liquid. Around midnight I remember wondering why she didn't look drunk.

The next thing I remember is waking up on the floor with a headache and a mouthful of dust. It was dark. My watch said nine a.m. SGT. I sat up as slowly as I could, and stood up even more slowly. I kept one hand on the wall and tried to balance on my feet. My head was somewhere near the ceiling.

I groped for the door handle, opened the cabin door. My idea was to hobble up to the entertainment deck for some coffee. Hallway light showed that the cabin bunk was empty.

I thought about that for a second, then switched on the cabin light. The woman wasn't in the cabin. I slid the shower door open. She wasn't in the shower cubicle. Suddenly I was wide awake.

The tether ride down from Rupert Sheldrake was uninteresting until we were below the clouds, gliding toward J.F.K. in the rain, and then you could see the giant buildings, mile after mile of them, rising out of the smog.

We plunged into the smog and the ground came up and bumped us. I let most of the other passengers wrestle each other out before I followed them down the grey metal tunnel to the customs cubicles. After I had been decontaminated, x-rayed, searched, and interrogated on my political beliefs, I lugged my suitcase through a crowded terminal concourse echoing with flight announcements. At a bend in the concourse, someone had spray-painted on the concrete wall: "Fuck Earth."

Suddenly I was dizzy. My ears rang and a headache fireballed behind my eyes. My suitcase sagged from my hand, and the scuffed, litter-strewn floor oozed toward me.

"Let me help you there, buddy," a hoarse voice said, and a hard hand closed on my arm. On my other side

a bald, wrinkle-faced man was putting a sonic tube away in a raincoat. He grabbed my other arm, picked up my suitcase, and grinned.

"Jeez, you don't look so good," he said. "You better come with us."

I had no choice. By the time the trembling weakness left me I was in the back seat of an unmarked rotor-car lifting off a police landing diamond outside the terminal. The big man with the hoarse voice sat next to me. He didn't answer my questions about what was going on.

InterPol New York Headquarters towered square and gigantic into a concrete-grey sky. On the 205th floor a quiet panelled hall led to a door that said R.E. Schrenkoff, Section Chief. Inside was a big office. One wall was transparent; through it you could see grey sky, grey buildings and, far below, grey street. The top of the big desk was chillingly tidy.

Behind the desk was a man. He was narrow, sharp, pale, with black hair slicked back, shiny black eyes. His temples bulged with hardware surgery. He pointed to a chair. The hoarse-voiced man and the wrinkle-faced man sat discreetly near the door.

"We want the girl, Karmade," said the man behind the desk as soon as I sat down. His voice was like him — sharp, hard, shiny.

The first rule in talking to someone you think is lie-detector enhanced is: never give a straight answer.

"What girl?" I asked.

He stared hard at me for a minute, then leaned back, folded his hands on his stomach. He became poetical.

"Karmade, picture yourself in a jail cell. Ten minutes from now. Facing twenty years in the Tombs without parole." He leaned forward over the desk and whispered: "Ever seen the old cons coming out of the Tombs? Seen what they look like?"

"Why should I go to jail?"

He had a chilling smile.

"You don't understand," he said. "We found her skin traces in your cabin, in your bunk, in your shower. She's wanted, Karmade. She was wanted — bad — even before she slaughtered the two InterPol detectives tailing her on the flight."

I didn't say anything. I was trying to remember my lawyer's satellite paging number.

Schrenkoff opened a desk drawer, pulled something out.

"Ever see this before?" he said.

I looked at a short, needle-pointed spark-blade. A serial number I recognized was etched on the palm-contoured power-pack. I remembered putting the blade in my luggage on Callisto. I suddenly didn't remember packing it on the transport.

"This cut down the agents," said the shiny man. "Found in their cabin on the Titan. You see, Karmade..." He put the blade back in the drawer. "We've got you."

"That blade was stolen from me."

"That so? What a coincidence. We find skin fragments of a hired killer in your bed, and two agents tailing her are slaughtered with your blade. And you never saw the woman, you say, and the blade was stolen. Very strange." He leaned across the desk and whispered: "Think of the Tombs, Karmade."

I thought about them. I looked out the transparent office wall at where neon was starting to glow down

on darkening streets.

Finally Schrenkoff said: "Look, we don't want you, Karmade. We don't think you helped her work on the agents. Or what if you did? We don't want you. Bring us the girl and we'll forget what we've got on you. Otherwise, we'll turn you over to the prosecutor with a political recommendation. You won't have a chance. What do you say, Karmade?"

My apartment was a standard three-by-three metre size, with sanitary cubicle and retractable-appliance kitchen, but the living room had something I paid premium rent for – a window. When I got home from visiting Section Chief Schrenkoff I opened it and sat on the foldaway bed I had left unmade 16 months ago, staring down the hundred-storey ravine the street made between buildings. The city was dark, and the darkness of it seemed to creep into my brain, as if I was already in the Tombs.

Around midnight I made myself move. I switched on my desk console, fitted a modem jack into my ear, and played back the 72-hour auditory memory chip in my surveillance earpiece. I guessed the chances of any competent killer being caught that way were about zero, but when I indexed the sequence where I had drunk myself to sleep in my cabin, I heard an unfamiliar burst of compressed speech. I played it back slower. There was a clicking sound, and the woman's voice said: "Devil's Corner, New York." It took me about a second to realize that the clicking was my transport cabin console being programmed for directions to Earth destinations.

It was raining when I pushed my way out of the Devil's Corner subway station. Awnings and flashing marquees almost met above the street, making a garish tunnel that people crowded through. Bums and skinny children huddled in sheltered corners, trying to sell broken-down electronic equipment. Far above, you could glimpse the flashing colours of giant signs on buildings that disappeared into dark smog.

The street was lined with peep joints, pervodromes, dope bars. Men, women and other types in flashy clothes, or very few clothes, stood outside doors drumming up business. It took me hours of searching whorehouse meatbooks and describing the woman to anyone who would listen to work my way to a peep joint at the end of the Corner, near where the neon and glitter give out, and the dark slums start. There was a floor show going on, featuring a huge sex android with oozing tentacles, and half a dozen strippers. I sat on a hard, crowded bench in the dark, a glass of liquor in my hand. Slowly I became aware that I knew one of the strippers.

She danced liquidly and well, eyes looking at nothing, muscles rippling in simulated ecstasy and agony. I tried to watch some of the other girls, but I couldn't.

Finally, after many human-machine interfaces, the lights went down. There was applause, drunken cheering. I pushed past people sitting, then people standing, then people leaning at a bar to reach a curtained doorway set below a corner of the stage. Another show was starting, music blaring, the stage blazing with light.

Beyond the curtain was a dim passage that was a little less deafening than the strip hall. The floor was bare concrete, the walls plastic curtains with voices behind them. I worked my way down, pulling curtains

aside and looking into tiny cubicles where strippers were in various stages of undress. At the end of the passage was a metal door, and in the last cubicle was the woman.

She was standing with her back to me, zipping up the jumpsuit I had bought her on the transport, looking into a mirror on a broken-down dressing table. When she heard me come in she turned fast.

She looked at me for a second, then started, then looked at me some more.

"Hello," she said breathlessly. "I didn't expect you – that is, I –"

"You expected I'd be in jail. I almost was. But now I'm not going to be."

"What do you mean?"

"Are you going to come quietly, as they say in the movies, or do I have to fold you up and carry you?"

Her right hand moved ever so slightly. It seemed to want to be near the hip pocket of her jumpsuit.

"Come where?"

"InterPol Headquarters. Section Chief Schrenkoff. Don't ask me what Section. He wants to talk to you. Something about some dead people."

Her right hand made a flashing movement, but I was ready. By the time the spark-blade was coming toward me I had my gun pointed at the middle of her body.

"No," I said. The blade hesitated. A long second passed.

"Please don't make me kill you," I said. "I don't want to."

"They'll kill me if they get me," she whispered, staring at the gun.

"I won't know about it," I said.

"You'll know," she whispered.

"Drop the rig," I said.

She dropped it. I kicked it and it clattered away somewhere.

There was a click behind me, on the other side of the curtain.

I hit the floor, her collar in my hand. Then there was a roaring and the room exploded. The curtain flew in shreds, the dressing table dashed itself to splinters, the concrete wall spat dust. I felt my gun kick in my hand. The roaring stopped and something heavy clattered to the floor of the passage. People were screaming behind the ringing in my ears. Smoke billowed. Part of a man was lying in the passage, the missing part splattered on the curtain behind him. I looked at the woman. Blood was oozing from a place on her cheek. I put out my hand to wipe it off, but she was moving, picking up the machine-gun that lay by the dead man, spitting flame and noise back down toward the strip hall as she tumbled across the floor, dragging open what was left of the metal door at the end of the passage. I pushed myself shakily up and ran after her. The door opened onto a narrow alley. It was dark back there, and I was rattled – otherwise, maybe I wouldn't have let her get behind me. As it was, the last thing I saw was a bright light that seemed to come from the back of my head.

Iwoke up on a deep, soft sofa in a hushed anteroom with crystal floor lamps, Oriental rugs, and priceless 2-D television sets on real wood stands. I was handcuffed, and my head felt like someone had



been driving nails into it. InterPol Section Chief Schrenkoff sat nearby, watching me with cold, shiny eyes. I closed my eyes again and lay still to ease the pounding in my head.

After a while someone said: "Mr Steele will see you now."

Schrenkoff pulled me to my feet with a hand as hard as a pipe wrench. A bald man wearing tails held a door for us.

On the other side of the door was a carpeted football field with an arched, frescoed ceiling. Soft light came from nowhere. The walls were dark wood, oiled and delicately carved. The air was so still you could hear the blood rush inside your ears. At the far end of the room something was going on. Schrenkoff led me that way.

When we got there, I realized we were in an office. There was a massive oak desk, a man in a military outfit standing stiffly facing it. Forty metres away, a fire burned in a huge stone fireplace.

Behind the desk was – something. It had most of a man's head, and the right side was part man, but the left side showed the rigid contours of machine under the silk smoking jacket, and the left hand was translucent plastic. The left side of the neck was metal, and a web of face-contoured mesh ran from it into the bald head. Its eyes glittered wetly under drooping lids. It watched us get nearer and stop next to the soldier. Schrenkoff's hand tightened on my arm. There was silence for a long minute.

Then it croaked: "So, Mr Schrenkoff, the woman has escaped again."

Schrenkoff swallowed and levelled a finger at the

man in the military outfit.

"McEvily –" he got out before the croaking cut him off.

"Major McEvily will be suitably rewarded. He reports losing four operatives in his encounter with her at Devil's Corner. Perhaps she is more difficult than I anticipated. However, when I buy an InterPol Section Chief – especially at the price I paid for you Mr Schrenkoff – I expect results. Quick results, Mr Schrenkoff."

Schrenkoff said desperately: "This man was with her at Devil's Corner."

Major McEvily spun on us with howling eyes. "My men captured the prisoner," he snarled. "My men engaged in a shoot-out with eight to ten armed –"

"I put the finger on him and I planted the beeper on him and I put the wind up him. You bungled your side of it, McEvily. There were no eight to ten armed anything – just a skinny little stripper and this worn-out peeper shooting up your whole task force."

McEvily came a step towards us. "My informants confirm that there were –"

"Be quiet, Major McEvily," croaked the thing, and Major McEvily was quiet.

The thing looked at me. I didn't like that. I wouldn't have liked it even if I hadn't been handcuffed and bruised and far from home. It had ancient, crawling eyes. It said: "Where is the woman, Mr Karmade?"

"I don't know." Maybe if I was a hero I would have told it to go to hell.

"You were with her at Devil's Corner. Presumably you helped her dispose of the task force."

"I got one of them. I guess she got the rest."

"And where is she now?"

"I don't know."

Schrenkoff stuck a spark-blade into my stomach, set on low power. I tried to make a hole in the floor with my head. When I started to remember who and where I was, Schrenkoff and McEvily were holding me by the armpits and I was vomiting down the front of my shirt.

The thing sighed emotionlessly.

"Mr Karmade," it said. "We are going to persuade you to help us."

I said with difficulty: "Try hiring me."

Schrenkoff slapped the side of my face. "He said he wants to know where the woman is."

"I don't owe her anything," I said in the direction of the monster. "I'm not going to hide her from you. She lied to me, got me in hock for two murders. She tried to cut my throat at Devil's Corner."

Schrenkoff stepped away from me, pulling back his hand.

"Mr Schrenkoff," said the thing mildly, and Schrenkoff's hand froze. Nobody moved.

"You want the woman? I'll find her. I found her once. I would have brought her in if your cowboys hadn't tried to splash me. All I ask is that you give me some money." I shook my arms up and down. "And take these god-damn things off."

The thing looked at me for longer than was comfortable. Then its mechanical hand touched something on top of the desk.

A minute later there were soft footsteps. Something bumped the back of my legs and someone pulled the handcuffs off, helped me sit down. There was a little carved table next to me, with a glass of water and a cloth napkin on it. I drank the water and used the napkin to wipe puke, sweat and blood off my face. I noticed my hand was shaking when I drank the water.

When I was done drinking and wiping, someone handed me a printout. It showed that my bank account had been credited with a large sum.

"Now," said the thing.

I talked.

After I was done, it sat machine-still, death-still. Finally, it raised a hand and flicked a finger at McEvily and Schrenkoff, like someone brushing away a piece of dust. They turned and walked.

The huge room felt empty. The thing said: "Mr Karmade, do you know who I am?"

"No," I said. "I can't even figure out what you are."

"I am Rexon Augustus Steele."

I stared, startled in spite of myself.

“I will tell you a story, Mr Karmade. Listen carefully, because your life may depend on it.

"A hundred and ten years ago I was an old man. I was rich, one of the richest men in the solar system, but I was dying. The prosthetic surgeons had done all they could, at great expense. I was told that my body would not stand another organ replacement. My bioelectric kidneys would last three years at most, my heart perhaps five. I was covered with scars and filled with stiff plastic. But I didn't want to die. I had so much money! It was a waste to die when I had so much money, when every day I had more money, and when every day I thought of ways to get more.

"Those were the years when the first mining teams

landed on the giant moons of Saturn and Jupiter. The explorations went smoothly; there were no life forms to speak of, and the moons were rich in deuterium. The only failure was the loss of the first Callisto Mission. It landed safely and transmitted routinely for a few hours, then stopped. Contact could not be re-established. A second team was sent.

"The startling news the second Callisto Mission transmitted was that the first mission had not been lost after all: the first team were safe, but they had abandoned their landing vehicles to go after something their monitors had detected on the moon's surface. By the time the second mission arrived, they were dismantling the landing vehicles and carrying parts, mainly the life systems, into some caves several kilometres away. They wouldn't let the second party into the caves, and shot a member of the second team who tried to interfere with them; other than that, they were peaceable. They just wanted to be left alone to worship, they said. What they were worshipping, and what they had found on the moon, they would not say. Some god, or devil, or life form, no one knew. No one knows today. By the time an InterPol military squad arrived from Earth, the Zagrebs, as the first team had begun calling themselves, had disappeared. Expeditions through the caves found no sign of them or their life systems, just dark greenish frost-rock, ancient and unmoving.

"No one knew what the incident meant. Authorities on Earth decided to treat it as some strange form of space sickness, and went on constructing Callisto mining plants in an orbit close to Luna. That made jobs, and the Zagreb publicity soon died down.

"Nine years after the Zagrebs disappeared I got a message from them over a secret communication system I had set up for business communications of an urgent and sensitive nature. The message said simply: 'Eternal Life. We Deliver.'

"I was in a rage: the communication system had cost a great deal of money, and its design was break-proof. My lawyers transmitted to the reply code given in the message, demanding to know who had breached the system and how, threatening legal and paramilitary action. Technicians scanned for the source of the break-in. Somewhere on Callisto, their instruments said, but strangely there was no transmission lag. A new message appeared on the decoding processor in my office. It said, 'You are an old man, Mr Steele. Do you want to die? Send your lawyers away. Talk to us alone and we will tell you secrets.' I stared at this message a long time. Then I sent everyone away, and sat in front of the console alone.

"'We are the Zagrebs,' the console said. 'We know you are dying. We want to help you.'

"'Why?' I typed.

"'You have something we want.'

"'What?'

"'Take a fast ship to Callisto. Free fall at 20.01.53 north magnetic, 93.11.30 west, 1400 kilometres, and wait for instructions. Shield your ship against radar detection. Be sure to avoid patrols. Do not let anyone know you are coming.'

"'Ridiculous.'

"'In two months your prosthetic liver will malfunction. Then you will come.'

"I had scanning stations concealed on Callisto to

monitor covert visits by competitors with possible interests in the mining business. My people checked the 20.01.53 north, 93.11.30 west trajectory. Over the past year three small ships had lain in that orbit – fast, custom-designed ships only a few people in the system could afford, all three radar-shielded. My experts identified them as belonging to three of the richest men in the solar system, old and dying men, like myself. Two months later my prosthetic liver began to malfunction.

"My agents had heard rumours of miraculous improvements in the health of two of the old men whose ships we had detected around Callisto. Death at close range makes men grasp at straws. Before the rumours could be confirmed, I was heading for Callisto in my private ship.

"By the time we reached Callisto I was sick and delirious. I remember getting into orbit, and a message from the Zagrebs telling us to wait. I ordered my people to follow the Zagrebs' instructions even if I was unconscious, and they must have done so, because I next found myself alone in a cave on the surface, wearing a spacesuit, and propped against some rocks. I was too weak to move.

"Then a woman appeared in front of me. I didn't see where she came from, didn't know if she was real. She wasn't wearing a spacesuit, or anything else. She was beautiful. She said: 'I am Life. Stand up and take Me.' I couldn't move. She knelt down and whispered through my helmet: 'I will give myself to you, old man, but you must pay. After you are healed, something will be asked of you. You must do it. If you go back on your word, you will die. Do you agree?'

"I said 'Yes.'

"The next thing I remembered was waking up in the cabin of my ship, headed back to Earth. I was weak, but no longer sick. Every day I felt stronger. My prosthetic as well as my real organs seemed to be working perfectly. I had a few jumbled memories of what had happened in the cave, but none of them made sense. As soon as I set foot on Earth, post-hypnotic instructions from the Zagrebs filled my mind. They were not awful or even illegal, merely that I make annual shipments of a certain mineral to a certain location on Callisto. The mineral is neither dangerous nor very rare; my informants indicate that the Zagrebs attach some spiritual significance to it. I have kept up the shipments. And so, my scanning stations tell me, have at least four other corporations, all owned by rich men who are rumoured now to be over two hundred years old.

"This –" Steele swept his hand over the mechanical part of his body "– happened in an assassination attempt thirty-two years ago, when People's Food Army terrorists rocketed my rotorcar. The Zagreb treatment gave no protection against such injuries. So the Zagrebs have kept their word. Maybe."

Steele was stiller than a living thing could be. Then he started talking again. "Two years ago, the old men began to disappear: Oscar Angel III, Buka Razt, and Pablo Smircea. Freighters belonging to all three had been observed making secret deliveries to the Zagrebs. My agents investigated the incidents. Angel and Smircea, and possibly Razt also, were with women when they disappeared. Two of the women were traced. Both were Zagrebs from Callisto. Both had

boarded Earth vessels posing as returning miners. Both went straight to the cities where the old men lived, ingratiated themselves with them. Both were alone with the men when they disappeared.

"I stationed agents at New New York port on Callisto, with instructions to identify and destroy Zagrebs attempting to travel to Earth. I had kept my part of the bargain. I had no intention of being cheated."

There was silence for a minute. Then I said: "You killed every Zagreb trying to travel to Earth?"

"Zagrebs are prohibited by law from leaving Callisto, Mr Karmade. Though primitive and apparently harmless tribespeople, their ancestry and heretical politics offend the System government. You might say I was doing a public service by preventing serious felonies."

"Then if I bring her to you, you'll kill her."

"If you don't bring her to me, I'll kill you."

I must have fallen asleep in my chair, because when I woke up I was sitting with my overcoat on, my body still as a corpse, and a bad taste in my mouth. Dull grey daylight came through my apartment window. Someone was knocking at the door.

I opened it. The woman stood there, a cheap raincoat over her jumpsuit, her hair wet. Her hands were empty. I couldn't think of anything to say. I let her in.

"Want some breakfast?" I asked.

"No, thank you."

I went into the kitchen, poured some breakfast into a cup, tossed it off, filled the cup again, and came out holding the cup and bottle.

"What happened to you?" She was looking at my face.

"You mean after you hit me with the gun?"

"Yes."

"Had a bad night," I said. I sat in my chair and looked up at her. "There are men watching this apartment."

She smiled. "They're asleep."

"You're a woman that knows how to put people to bed. I guess you think I look tired, too."

She pulled off her raincoat.

"You look worse than tired," she said. "Do you have something I can dry off with?"

I waved my bottle at the sanitary cubicle. She went in and the air jets came on.

"What happened to you last night?" she said over the sound.

"I had a talk with a guy."

"Who?"

"Rexon Augustus Steele," I said. "You know him?"

"No."

"He says he knows you. Is it true you're a Zagreb agent smuggled here to murder him?"

She came out of the cubicle combing her fingers through her hair. "Do you think I am?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know who you are or why you're here talking to me when you know this place is crawling with Steele's people. I don't know why I'm sitting here talking to you after you tried to kill me last night."

"I could have killed you last night," she said. "I didn't."

"Why not?"

She didn't answer. She sat on the bed.

"Well, just to pass the time until we both get killed, you could tell me who you are and what you're doing here and why the toughest private police force in the system is trying to splash you," I said.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm trying to decide whether to help you."

"Why should you help me?"

"I don't know. I helped you on the transport against my better judgment. I helped you last night without wanting to. It seems to be my fate."

She studied me. Finally she said: "I am no one, from nowhere, and they are afraid of nothing."

"Lady," I said, "I'm tired. My head hurts. Any time now guys with guns are going to come through that door. Don't make my life harder. Please. There's a chance I'll want to help you — a smaller chance I can help you — but you've got to tell me who you are and what this is all about."

The woman stood up slowly and stretched, arching her body tautly, like a cat.

"Do you want to know who I am?" she said. Her black eyes felt hot on my face. She pulled the zipper down the front of her jumpsuit, and shrugged out of it. She wasn't wearing anything underneath. Her eyes were burning me like fire.

I was bathed in fire, white-hot and thunderous. I lived in regions of fire, a cocoon that slept in fire. I felt myself stirring, opening, unfolding. I stretched my wings; I flew, expanding, sailing. When I looked back, the fire was a tumbling ball floating in warm blackness. Ahead lay spaces that had no end. I went faster. There were, I saw, balls sailing around the fire, tumbling with deep and sonorous sounds. I passed the track of one and then another, and several more. Their music faded behind me. My wings stretched further and further, so that now they were like gossamer, now like webs, now like dancing fans of light. Now the tumbling balls were lost in darkness, there was emptiness, silence, me spinning, hurtling through it, growing as big as a planet, a sun, a solar system, still touching only silence. Then in that silence I heard a voice, sweet and crystalline and infinitely far away. Others joined it like crystal bells singing, and there were millions and millions of them, and billions and billions of them, calling to me from spaces so wide that not even thoughts could touch them.

I was lying face down in my bed, gasping and sweating. The woman's face was half an inch from mine, lips parted, eyes closed. One of her arms was around my neck. She lay very still. I put my head down on her shoulder. She smelled sweaty, dirty, and sweet. I kissed the corner of her mouth, leaving a little blood-stain there, pushed some stray blue hair off her forehead. My hand looked big and clumsy against her face.

I said hoarsely: "I saw something." She didn't move or say anything — or breathe.

I was up suddenly, standing over her, feeling for a pulse in her wrist, in her neck, feeling for breath at her mouth. She didn't have any of those things. I fumbled the epinephrine inhaler out of my first-aid kit, put it to her mouth, pressed the button. Her chest arched in an impersonation of being alive. Then she was still — no pulse, no breath. I tried again and again.



Nothing. I smashed the inhaler against the wall, grabbed her shoulders and shook her. Her head and arms flopped around. She looked very dead, and like she wanted to be left alone, or just didn't care. I stopped shaking her and sat on the edge of the bed. I didn't look at her. I looked at the drops of rain running down the window. I looked at my clothes, caked with dirt and blood, tangled up with her jumpsuit on the floor. I looked at the white scar on my stomach where a chicken-head from Death-Hole Warren had stabbed me, a long time ago, when I had first been a cop. After a while I looked at nothing. After a long time I noticed it was dark.

I sat at the desk and typed a phone number. After the second ring a hard face said, "McEvily."

I said: "I've got the woman."

"Don't move," he said, and hung up.

It took them eight minutes to get there. Before they came I put on clothes and wrapped the woman in a sheet. She was cold as ice, awkward and uncaring, far away.

I rode in the back seat of a rotor-car filled with gunment. They took the woman in a different car; I didn't see her when we landed and I was hustled to a cell the size of my shower and no place to look out. I didn't like it in there. I sat on the floor, closed my eyes and tried to remember the vision I had seen while making love to her, of being as big as a sun, soaring through space. I forgot to wonder how and why she had died. I didn't want to know. I was tired of wondering. I just wanted to be away from here.

I was pretty far away when the cell door clanked open. McEvily and two other goons hustled me out and walked me to the football field Rexon Augustus Steele used as an office. As we got within hailing distance of his desk, men dressed in white pushed a metal cart out from somewhere, parked it, and went away. The cart had something lying on it, covered with a sheet. We stopped by the cart, and McEvily and the other two gave military salutes.

McEvily said: "We don't know how he killed her. The medical boys figure some kind of nerve gas that doesn't leave traces. We don't know how he found her or whether he was involved in killing the agents watching the apartment."

Steele flicked his finger. McEvily and his thugs marched away out of sight. There was no one else in the huge space. Steele sat death-still, machine-still, looking at the thing on the cart. He sat that way for a long time.

Finally there was a whir, and his plastic arm lifted up. The hand extended across the desk on a metal stalk, pulled the sheet away from the woman's pale body.

A tremor seemed to run through him. He pulled his hand back in, and sat staring, rocking a little from side to side.

He said, "I didn't want you to kill her." His voice sounded different.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't — I'm sorry."

We both looked at her, Steele still rocking a little bit.

Slowly, I got a feeling. It started at the base of my head and went down my right arm to my hand. It felt like that part of my body was full of something, swollen. Without knowing why, I took two steps and touched the woman on the forehead.

She opened her eyes.

I don't know what Steele did. I stared. I leaned over her and stared into her eyes.

She blinked them, and rubbed them, as if she had been sleeping. She smiled at me, and sat up. She stretched. Then she turned towards Steele.

All the living parts of Steele were trembling. He looked like a trembling man half eaten by machine.

The woman got off the cart, never taking her eyes from Steele. She stood in front of the desk facing him.

He trembled. There was sweat on the side of his face that could sweat.

"Is it —" he choked a little "— is it you?" His voice sounded almost like a human voice.

"Yes," she said very gently. "I've come for you."

Tears started to come out of his old eyes and run down his grey cheeks. He trembled so much that it seemed the mechanical part of him would have to tear loose, break off.

"Don't be afraid," she said. She started to walk around the desk.

Then she caught fire. I didn't see how, but suddenly flames covered her naked body, white and yellow flames that roared like blow-torch flames. Through their brightness and fury I could see her in a kind of radiant light. I felt the fire's intense heat, but the flames didn't seem to hurt her. She seemed taller, and walked with a stately walk, as though fire was a royal robe. As she came near to Steele she raised her arms, and they were like wings of flame, and the fire got brighter and hotter, so I could hardly see her any more, and could hardly look at her.

Steele raised his arms to her and she stooped and folded him in the fire. Then he was on fire too, the flames enveloped both of them, and got hotter and brighter until I couldn't look at them, had to cover my face with my arms and stumble backward away from the heat. The roaring of the flames got louder, then diminished, so that when I opened my eyes they had almost burned out, and when I went around behind the desk and looked, Steele and the woman were gone, and there was nothing left of them, not even ashes.

Jamil Nasir is a Palestinian-American whose first story appeared last year in the magazine *Aboriginal SF*; his second won a prize in a recent "Writers of the Future" contest (it appears in the same Budrys anthology as Steve Baxter's "Blue Shift"). We are pleased to present his third published piece, above. He informs us that he has since sold a fourth to Robert Silverberg, for a 1990 *Universe* collection. He grew up mainly in the Middle East, but now lives and works as a lawyer in the USA.

Century Migraine

John Clute

There was a shock of recognition reading Steve Erickson for the first time. It was personal. In a piece I wrote last year for David Garnett's *Orbit Science Fiction Yearbook 1* (1988), I made a stab at shaping into short form a cluster of images that had always – for me at least – illuminated the well-known debt owed by Cyberpunk authors to the American thriller and to the film noir of the 1940s and 1950s. Hammett's Sam Spade (I said), and Chandler's Marlowe, and Macdonald's Archer, were like "haunted archaeologists, curators of the western slope of latter-day America, delving through the catacombs of the mean streets of LA for hieroglyphs and papyrus that would reveal the crimes that fixed the meaning of the world." And it was just the same (I said) with William Gibson. His protagonists also haunted the mazes of the world for a spoar of the ancient god who runs us for its sport. His heroes spoke a lingo of propitiation just like Marlowe, or Archer, or the hundred ghosts of film who populate David Thomson's superb book *Suspects* (1985), chief among them the terrifying George Bailey of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946). In all these novels, America defaults to Egypt. We come to Steve Erickson, whose books I had not read last year, but who says it all.

There are no private eyes in Erickson's first novel, *Days Between Stations* (1985), no granite cops steeped in lacrimae rerum till they glow like Dad – though the heart of the book does transfigure into an erotized film-noir purée the tale of the making of Abel Gance's *Napoleon* (1926), and of the fifty years it took until Kevin Brownlow managed to put it all together. But in the two novels under review, *Rubicon Beach* (1986; now first published in the UK by Futura at £4.50) and *Tours of the Black Clock* (Simon and Schuster, £11.95), detectives and private eyes duly roam the aisles of America and the Century, praying at the altars of method for a clue. Near the end of *Rubicon Beach*, a squad of Los Angeles detectives begins to investigate stories that a strange woman has been trespassing into the homes of the rich. Having traced her long hegira northwards from a magical South American jungle into an exhausted end-game beached America, the reader knows they will never find her, because she is not secular, she cannot be addressed from the surface of the world, or its maps. Her incursions into the evening world of America late in the century are like flashes of migraine. She is an unknown script, an oneirism in the veins of the eye. Migraine defaults to Egypt. Lowery, the lieutenant in charge, has sensed something of this; and "when [he] walked out of his office he found his men reading the

city map as though it were the writing on pyramid walls."

She has been given the name Catherine and uses it like a shell borrowed from another species. The story of her birth and upbringing in a South American jungle, whose components mock and ape the magic realism of that continent's writers, lies at the heart of *Rubicon Beach* which, like all of Erickson's novels, embeds a huge consecutive narrative within framing material whose effect is deeply fragmenting, so that frame and hindsight argue with one another like migraines. After her father is killed by a sailor she has saved, Catherine leaves with the murderer, sailing down the only river in this part of the continent to flow west rather than east. She eventually arrives in Peru, makes her way northwards, comes to the United States but without being aware that the United States is all the "America" we'll ever get in this world. She reaches Los Angeles. "From one end of the panorama to the other ran this city, and in the distance was a black line she recognized as the sea. Carved in the side of a mountain was a huge map like the maps of ancient Indians she'd seen on pyramid walls. The huge white map looked like this: HOLLYWOOD. 'America?' she said to the driver, unconvincd.

"Not just yet, sister," he said with a shake of his head; and pointed west. 'America.'

"But there's nothing else out there," she said in her own language, looking at the sea." She turns inland. She finds menial employment with the family of a Hollywood script writer named Llewellyn or Lee, who becomes obsessed – hooked – by her face. Her face is naked, intolerable, real, the face of the goddess. But to perceive her face entire is to cross the Rubicon from the America we know into a land comprised of dream and eros, in which fragments of her story and Llewellyn's generate alternate (but maybe more real) versions of the continent; it is a passage which Llewellyn cannot make. Her face turns into hieroglyphs he cannot read, and she disappears; no detective can find her. Llewellyn lies prostrate on the beach of the world, like a hooked fish. And the central portion of *Rubicon Beach*, which in fact makes up the bulk of the book, ends in scar tissue. The

episodes which frame this tale of double quest can be read as metaphoric consequences of the failure of Catherine and Llewellyn to make one world – to make sense – of each other.

The book begins in a surrealist near-future police-state America obscurely defined by its relationship to earlier states of the land, which are called America One and America Two. Just out of prison for telling a betraying joke about a chthonic tree – a tree full of Americans who live in its highest branches and who, it may be, have crossed each others' Rubicons and now share one growth, one inextricably interwed reality – a man named Cale haunts a drowned Ballardian Los Angeles, and is haunted in turn by Catherine, who he cannot reach. The book approaches its close through episodes set in England, where an old man named Lake ("Cale" reversed) slips deathwards on the wrong side of the beach of dreams; and yet another character – a mathematician who has discovered a secret number between 9 and 10 – travels into America, taking a train which crosses a river without a further shore, and which stops only to deposit him in the bole of a great tree, whose highest branches are full of Americans. And he sees her in the distance, and steps her way. She is the secret number, the lost chord, the Rubicon. The novel ends.

An essay in magic realism – a quasi-Pynchonesque fantasy of quest – an archaeology of the dreamed America – a jape; it is probably central to *Rubicon Beach* that it can be read in any or all these ways, and in other ways as well; the Escher-like spirals of storyline which make up *Rubicon Beach* admit to no opening gambit, no safe closure. Though it is perhaps rather less lucid than *Tours of the Black Clock*, *Rubicon Beach* remains Erickson's most potent oneirism (if one can be permitted to re-use a neologism, this time without intent to pun; by oneirism I would mean to designate a "dream" text whose content and telling are in no way regulated by any woken context; because there is no awaking from it, no door to shut except the last page, one cannot call *Rubicon Beach* a dream; dreams can be awoken from, or they are something else: the mirrors that entomb our every thought within the skull: or Hell).

At first or second glance, *Tours of the Black Clock* may seem less autonomous than its predecessor, more a tale of the awoken day, but no reader will finish its rather swollen pages safe in that assumption, because the book turns in on itself, before it shuts down, just as rigorously as *Rubicon Beach* did. The sense, all the same, that as we read *Tours of the Black Clock* we are spending more time in the open air may logically derive from the ostensible subject matter of Erickson's newst book, which is the Twentieth Century.

Here too, there is a central "objective" tale that occupies the heart and bulk of the book, the story of Banning Jainlight (whose name is almost certainly some sort of recondite play on the Jainist religion), a huge lad whose compulsive laughter reminds one of the message Gunter Grass's dwarf conveys by beating his Tin Drum, and who murders his western Pennsylvania family in the early 1930s before moving to New York where he becomes a pornographer only to escape a bevy of private eyes by fleeing to Vienna, where his obsessional craftings of fantasy encounters with a girl he glimpsed once in a window soon come to intrigue not only Goebbels but Hitler, who are identified in the text only as clients X and Z. Because Hitler confuses Banning's haunted vision of reality in a face with his own lost love, Geli Raubal, who killed herself in 1931, and because his immersion in pornography distracts him from invading Russia, the history of the Twentieth Century branches at this point, as if it were a river splitting into two streams to pass an island in its course; though in doing so it becomes a river whose other side is never visible, like the great river whose Rubicon one must cross to reach the real America in the previous book.

The girl's name is Tania. She carries with her a "map of the Twentieth Century," a blueprint of an Escher-like house with a secret room which contains its conscience. After a long depressive rallentando of episodes, and after the War has moved to Mexico, the ageing Banning Jainlight, blueprint now in his possession, kidnaps client Z from senile retirement in Venice, conveys him via Wyndeaux, a mythical French port central to *Days Between Stations*, to the other side of the Atlantic. There Z dies. Banning fixes over his heart the portion of the floorplan of the Century which contains its conscience, thus knitting the Century back together, and continues his search for Tania, who can now be found. The fragments which frame this story refract its central erotic obsessions, *weltschmerz*, lust for meaning, violence. There is finally no exit from this book either. As a vision of our Century it is at once perhaps too clear and too diffuse. Dominating the book,

Banning Jainlight and his pornography too easily embody a rhetoric of self-disgust and horror, a rhetoric which comes all too close to a kind of unrealistic chat about the unspeakable; while at the same time the littoral contortulations of the central image or model of the broken bournless river convey a spread of meaning too broad to clutch the heart, too shallow to drown in. And in the end, because the surface of his tales is choked with flotsam, and because a plethora of rogue symbols yaps constantly at one's keel, it is to drown that one reads Steve Erickson. It is to enter the oneirism without a hope to surface.

To review Ray Bradbury's *The Toynbee Convictor* (Grafton, £12.95) with any honesty would be to sprinkle broken glass into a soufflé. It's not that he is no longer capable of moments of pulp radiance that catch at – and embarrass – the willing heart. It's the refusal that hurts; the refusal to address in any real or telling fashion any aspect of the world that postdates 1950. From within the security fence of his gift, he tells us tales which sound like lies. With his easy Nay to the rough weather and short durance of the steerage fare most of us scrape to afford, he saps the will. There is, all the same, a neat portrait of John Huston in "Banshee," and "West of October" is a clean quick complicated fable whose calibre he should have taken as his bottom line. It is, instead, the summit he slips from. This is sad. This is sad. One must stop before one gets rude.

In *A Dozen Tough Jobs* (Mark V. Ziesing, \$16.00 and \$40.00 limited), Howard Waldrop tells a tall tale, which he sets in the Mississippi of 1925-1930. It can be presumed that we are being asked to think of William Faulkner, through whose hallucinated fables hurtle shaped shards of myth like music. In *A Dozen Tough Jobs*, like a passacaglia that skeletons the surface world, a comic retelling of the tale of the Twelve Labours of Hercules underpins a veiled and melancholy patter of anecdotes about the coming of age of a black adolescent in the Deep South. There are lots of jokes. Houlka Lee comes to Anomie, Mississippi to work off a prison sentence under the supervision of Boss Eustis; he cleans stables and borrows a madam's scarf, and so on. The story is told by the young black, whose full name is Invictus Ovidius Lace, but who is generally called I.O. Lace (or Iolus), in a tone which seems relaxed, but is in fact markedly contained; the passacaglia beneath the funning – its burden of significance borne effortlessly – paces like a rough beast through Waldrop's agreeable impersonation of black speech. *A Dozen Tough Jobs* is an extremely savvy game, a spoof both relaxed and muscular, told from the

verandah, in the cool of the evening. But under the stoop lurks the god. The eyes of the god are not shut.

Limits

Paul J. McAuley

It goes without saying that any writer worth a damn will always be pushing at the current limits of her art, will always be trying to take it that bit further, will not be content with aping easy attitudes. Will, to misquote someone or other, burnish the borrowed mirror with her breath and make it her own. In some ways, genre writers have to push themselves just that bit harder. The obdurate strength of genre conventions makes it difficult to lift them out of themselves, easy to work within them and shuffle the tropes around to produce a passable product. And so we come to the task of considering Robert Reed's second novel, *The Hormone Jungle* (Orbit, £6.99), which is heavy with ambition but strong enough only to flex skiffy conventions, not stretch them.

The beginning kicks off confidently. Two thousand years in the future, Mars and Venus and the planets of the nearer stars have been settled; every moon and major asteroid has its own unique ecosystem, human population (often genetically modified) and culture. Earth's civilization is concentrated around the equator, where skyhooks connect with orbital space habitats. Artificial intelligences impartially keep civilization going; ghosts, electronically recreated personae of the dead, haunt computer networks. And the rich can afford to have Flowers grown for them, compliant, physically perfect android lovers with artificial genetic systems and complete control over their pheromonal systems, able to arouse their owner at will. And one Flower, Miss Luscious Chiffon, has stolen something incredibly valuable from her gangster owner, with the help of a besotted teenager and the biotechnological wizard who created her. On the run, she wanders into a bar and is saved from an ugly scene with some whores by a self-exiled warrior from the Freestates, where war between tribes is fought by pain-infliction, not by killing. The warrior isn't all he seems to be, and Chiffon is no ordinary Flower, which is why she has been able to steal from her owner and betray her co-conspirators. Flexing her pheromones, she schemes to trap him into helping her, but he has his own reasons for doing so, including an old-fashioned sense of honour, something Chiffon hasn't run into before. In a very few pages, Reed has served up all the elements of a tasty SFnal thriller: girl on the run from evil crimelord helped

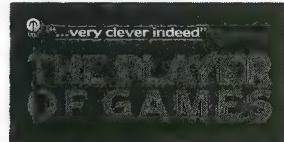
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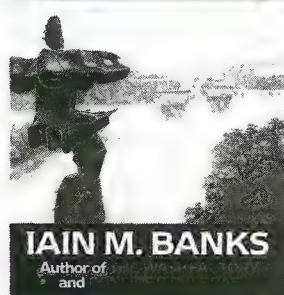
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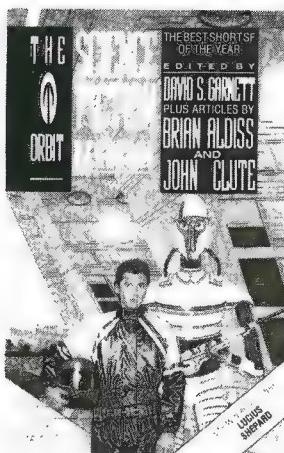


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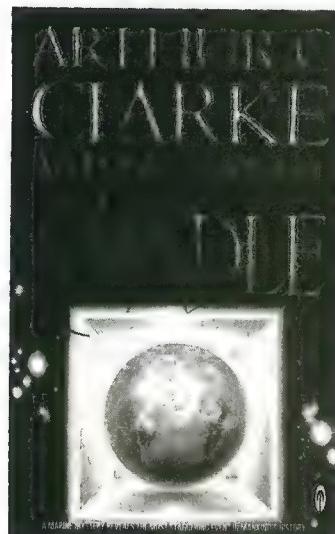
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out by competent exotic hero, prospect of a tour through a complex and colourful series of cultures.

But it doesn't happen.

Having bolted his baroque body-work on a tried and true sfnal chassis, and kickstarted the thing into life, Reed tries to make it do something different. He is more interested in his characters than the sf scenario they happen to inhabit. The plot is on hold for most of the book, while Chiffon hides out in the impregnable apartment and the warrior engages in his kind of subtle combat with the gang-lord, who really is not much more than a paper tiger. There is some diversion with a subplot in which a psychotic exiled from an edenic society plots revenge on a cyborg who has figuratively kicked sand in his face, but it feels like a completely separate story tipped in to make up weight. It touches the main plot, when the consequences of the psychotic's revenge finally trigger Chiffon's flight from the impregnable apartment, and in order to save her and himself the warrior must act against his principles – but too late, our attention has been lost.

The main failing is that, given their overwhelming importance, the characters are for the most part simply transplanted 20th-century Americans. To be sure, they are depicted with skill and insight, but their behaviour and mores are insufficiently differentiated, given the enormous diversity of the cultures from which they purport to come. They are less interesting than the potential of their setting, which is never fully realized. Likewise, the contemporary world too often shows through the gaudy dressing of Reed's stage sets: the apartment building in which much of the novel takes place may be derived from genetically tailored trees, but for all that it isn't far removed from the stucco dingbat apartment buildings (to pick a place I'm familiar with) Palms, L.A. And so on. Under the paintjob, the motor of the plot hasn't been regeared for the subtle changes Reed tries to put it through. With less ambition Reed could have pulled off a perfectly decent post-cyberpunk caper novel instead of stalling in the parking lot, but at least there's enough evidence of solid skill and talent to suggest that his next novel, or the one after, could be the one to look out for.

One thing Jack Womack's *Terraplane* (Unwin Hyman, £12.95) doesn't lack is speed. From the first page it hits the ground running, and the pace doesn't slacken for a moment thereafter. As espionage mission in a frenetically capitalistic USSR at the turn of the 21st century goes wrong, and the black ex-U.S. Army general and his inhumanely efficient bodyguard (hip to the blues of Robert John-

son, whose song gives the book its title) are forced to use the device they've stolen to escape pursuit. They crash (literally) in the past of an alternate America, where slavery has only just been abolished, Churchill has been assassinated, and Hitler is about to begin his Putsch in Europe. The contact who betrayed them makes off with the device, and the beautiful Russian scientist who willingly defected with them has contracted Tunguska flu, which had devastated the alternate Earth's population and will devastate mainstream Earth too, if the other inventor of the device manages to fulfil his ambition and kidnap Stalin. Told in a clipped, compressed, brutal dialect (which fortunately flattens out towards an approximation of normal American once the alternate time-stream has been gained, for although Womack is skilful, he is no Anthony Burgess), it's an efficient tale told with gusto and plenty of invention, not to mention plenty of often unnecessary ultraviolence. We are in an amoral zone here, where the only response to brutishness is slashhackburn, and the only character we're allowed to care about is a black ex-slave doctor who helps the trio and gets killed, so it goes, and love is left to symbolically wander in nothingness between both worlds, which just about sums up the overkill c-word philosophy. Recommended, but not for the squeamish.

In Christopher Hyde's *Crestwood Heights* (Simon and Schuster, £11.95) we know what we are in for when the heroine, driving to the house she's inherited on her uncle's death, begins to explain to herself why she's going there, and in a cod Oirish accent to boot. Oh dear. Straight away, she becomes suspicious – well, she would, wouldn't she – of the suburban paradise of Crestwood Heights, which is equipped with every conceivable advanced technological aid to the specifications of a megalomaniac straight out of the Dr Strangelove school of method acting. With the help of a gay ex-Marine who just happens to run the local coffee shop she gradually uncovers the true story of her uncle's death, and the grisly secrets harboured by the nearby Cold Mountain Institute. Fairly predictable stuff to anyone halfway familiar with the genre, it has an idiot plot that to keep moving requires our heroine to behave like an idiot at every crucial point. But it fulfills its genre expectations with ease: there's a respectable body count; a car chase; an escape from an impregnable room; and not one but two cliff-hanging endings. Hollywood should love it.

The title novelette of Robert R. McCammon's collection of horror stories, *Blue World* (Grafton, £12.95), is pretty silly too. A priest who falls

for a blue-movie actress manages to redeem himself, save her from a psychopath called, er, Travis, and get her to give up both her acting career and kick cocaine. It borrows some from *Taxi Driver* and some from *Hardcore*, but it doesn't have either the former's relentless obsession or George C. Scott's steelcored courage, and in the end lasciviousness wins out over would-be morality. A pity that it lets down what is otherwise a fairly nifty collection of well-crafted entertainments, from the gritty claustrophobia of "Nightcrawlers," an episode straight out of prime *Twilight Zone*, in which a Vietnam Vet has to stay awake because his dreams of his buddies returning from the dead to extract revenge are for real, to the high spirits of "Night Calls the Green Falcon," in which an aging ex-two-reeler star gets to play his superhero role one more time, in ten cliffhanging episodes.

A while back I castigated A.A. Attanasio for the overripe often impenetrable prose style of his routine quest tale *Arc of the Dream*. Although his style hasn't exactly been toned down, I'm pleased to say that in his latest novel, *Wyvern* (Grafton, £12.95), it has found an ideal subject, and the result is something passing strange and more than a little wonderful. Beginning in the jungles of early 17th-century Borneo, it ranges across half the world as it spins out the story of the growth to maturity and getting to wisdom of Jaki, a half-caste boy raised as a sorcerer to fulfil a prophecy, from which destiny he flees to become by turn pirate and trader.

A big, rambling tale that not very seriously turns about the theme of the yielding of native lore to the relentless one-dimensional logic of western civilization, the lush dislocations of its prose perfectly match the pragmatic mysticism of stone-age cultures and the gusto and high style, as colourful and action-packed as an Errol Flynn movie, of Jaki's adventures after he is rescued by Trevor Pym, a pirate under whose command Jaki comes of age. Jaki falls in love with the daughter of the naval captain who captures and executes Pym, then revenges Pym's death and makes off with the daughter: and thereafter the narrative threatens to become clogged with unravelling episodic adventures, as Jaki and his love flee the naval captain's relentless pursuit. But it manages to come good in the end, via seachase and shipwreck to what will become Brooklyn to a reconciliation that is unexpected and moving. Dripping with prose and characterization that only just stays on the right side of overripe, *Wyvern*, like a hothouse bloom, won't be to everyone's taste. But Attanasio's confident and convincing depiction of jungle cultures, the economics and politics

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of piracy, naval warfare and much else, raise it from the limits of simple adventure fiction to something original.

A Good Thing

If it's possible to have too much of a good thing, then Jack Vance's *Araminta Station* (NEL, £3.50) must be pretty near it. A small group of teenagers growing up in Araminta Station, a tiny community meant to police and research the nature-reserve world of Cadwal, have to prove themselves worthy of a chance at a limited number of citizenships. Glawen Clattuc joins the security bureau and has various adventures solving a particularly nasty crime. It's all recounted in a manner similar to the author's much shorter "Alastor Cluster" books. The language is simple, rather formal; the fun is in the strange customs, art-forms and cults the protagonist encounters. The general effect is a sort of travelogue of Vance's galaxy, with footnotes, lists and asides from author to reader. I like it, but found that it got a bit wearisome before 480 pages were up.

Jericho Falls by Christopher Hyde (Headline, £3.99) is another very long book. The first few chapters establish some characters in a small New England mill town – the policeman, the schoolteacher, some teenagers in love, Jewish shoemaker, village idiot (why does he have to be called Bodo Bimm?), grasping businessman, Vietnam veteran turned craftsman and so on. Then a secret government germ warfare experiment backfires, and the rest of the book is spent wiping them out one by one in various nasty ways. The QQ9 virus causes death by osmosis, a sort of reverse cholera, everything that can burst does. It strikes an unlikely combination of people – sexually active adults except for pregnant women, diabetics (and, of course, the village idiot) and then only in the presence of petrol! If this book had been written by an English writer it would have been set 18 months later in the forcibly ruralized world created by such a green disease. As it is, a very large part of it is taken up with descriptions of the weapons and procedures the US army use to kill everyone who might conceivably have come into contact with the accident.

Napoleon Disentimed by Hayford Peirce (Bantam, £3.50) is the story of Kevin MacNair alias Kevin Frost, an American conman trading on supposed aristocratic Scottish connections, who is snatched into an alternate Europe in which the Russian Empire was destroyed by the Turks, and so Napoleon's survived to dominate Europe. He pretends to be the Prince of Wales from an alternate universe and nearly gets away with it, getting

caught up in complex plots to kidnap Buonaparte by time machine and developing an obsession with introducing the drinking of Champagne. The style is rather restrained, gently comic, and (as so often) the alternate world is, more old-world, less harsh than ours, the technology almost Heath-Robinsonish. It's a pity that there is only one female character of any note. I find it hard to imagine that a world that had Napoleon and Palmerston wouldn't have known Champagne – whilst it's true that the "Methode Champenoise" only came into major use in the 19th century I believe that the wine of that region was both sparkling and fashionable well-before the 18th Century. It's also quite hard to suspend disbelief in the way Kevin is so nonchalant in the face of sudden shifts in reality, but I suppose that's part of the fun.

You always know where you are with Harry Harrison's Bill the Galactic Hero, and *The Planet of the Robot Slaves* (Avon, USA; forthcoming in the UK from Gollancz) is exactly what you'd expect. A motley band of Space Troopers fight, or more likely flee, their way through a planet of unending warfare between humans, robots, lizards and worse, each nation of which seems to be a parody of the work of some sf writer or other. For example, Cy Berpunk's Tale: "In the dark alley Cy sought safety behind the overfilled garbage can that compressed under the fatigue of days, discard printout and workweary compchips, derelict discards of onrushing technology obscenely melding." I enjoyed it – although, as with the Vance, I prefer this sort of stuff in small doses.

(Ken Brown)

forever set apart.

In *Stormwarden* by Janny Wurtz (Grafton, £12.95) the wizard of wind and water is betrayed and imprisoned. The only people who can help him, and prevent the demons which he has banished from being released, are a girl child and a weakling youth. A harsh convincing world of elemental conflicts (weather and fire), violent battles (both physical and supernatural), and moral dilemmas. The decisions which the young people have to make may well destroy them. Sensitivity is there, but often hidden beneath a hard strength or used as a cloak for deceit. My only dissatisfaction was with the nature of the "Vaere," who teach and give power to those they favour. I felt that their "secret" undermined rather than enhanced the credibility of this world.

A "world" more carefully rooted in our own is to be found in *Samraj* by Elaine Aron (NEL, £7.95). This is a retelling of part of the ancient Indian holy book, the Mahabharata, believed to be based on real historical events from the 10th century BC. I only know of that work by reputation but it is clear that a lot of research has gone into this novel and it is impressive on three counts. Firstly as a historical novel it rings true – so far as a western reader with only a smattering of knowledge of Indian history can tell. Secondly the characters live and breathe as human beings and not just respectful two-dimensional representations of their originals: Drapaudi's dilemma in her relationships with the sons of Pandu; Yudishtira with his dream of becoming Samraj, a "high king"; and always in the shadows the enigmatic Krishna. Most of all Elaine Aron has succeeded in neither denying or distorting the religious message of the original text nor in allowing it to become a treatise – (Hinduism made simple!). I wait eagerly for the further volumes which are promised.

A noticeable amount of research has also gone into *Hunter's Moon: A Story of Foxes* by Garry Kilworth (Unwin Hyman, £12.95), although unfortunately the joins between his research and the story are sometimes obvious. There are also occasions, such as when O-ha and her mate are living on the marsh with the old hound, when the story itself almost reduces to the level of a Disney cartoon. However most of the time the tale of the foxes, their changing environment and their feud with Sabre the Ridgeback, is very well developed. I particularly liked the way in which the animals speak recognizable languages, a different one for each species. Dogs and foxes speak English, the badger slips into the odd phrase in Anglo-Saxon, birds speak in German and a squirrel chatters away in Italian. In contrast the humans "bark" at each other and "howl" when they sing.

Fantasy, Etc.

In *Dawnspell: The Bristling Wood* (Grafton, £12.95) Katharine Kerr continues the sequence which she began in *Daggerspell*. The story of Nevyn, Jill and Rhodri continues, not just in the "present" but also in their previous incarnations. Kerr handles this narrative device with great skill, staying with each story long enough to establish the characters and their dilemmas before leaving at a point of tension. Nevyn, the old man who must live until the others finally fulfill their true fates (however many lives it takes), is the anchor: firm but understanding, wise and yet torn by the sufferings of his friends. Kerr's world is convincing in its complexity, built on known Celtic lore – like half-remembered legends – and yet totally different from anybody else's work. I particularly liked her elves: nothing fey or precious about them, rooted in the real world but, with their long lives and memories,

Space Demons by Gillian Rubinstein (*Magnet*, £1.99) is a book for children about a computer game with a difference. When the schoolchildren playing the game get to a certain level of competency they are swept into the computer itself, and their lives depend on how each of them copes under the stress.

Dark Toys and Consumer Goods is an impressive collection of short stories by Laurence Staig (Macmillan, £6.95) set in a future of twisted consumerism: where shopping centres, credit cards, holograms turn into the stuff of nightmares. Each story combines helplessness and madness in the face of this disturbing new world. Chilling variants on the traditional themes of the horror tale.

(Phyllis McDonald)

Comics Lilian Edwards

OK, hands up who wants to be the new Alan Moore? Qualifications: British, of course, new to the field (or just new enough not to have been heard about by dozy Americans), vaguely iconoclastic and able to demonstrate all the right sort of ideological inclinations in the course of a death-defying squabble between two men in tights. Rewards: a DC superhero comic all of your own, lots of grubby royalties and maybe even a scathing review in comicdom's answer to the *National Enquirer*, the *Comic Journal*.

So who will it be? Maybe Moore's next door neighbour, Jamie Delano, whose *Hellblazer* (monthly, DC) is still, despite its revolving artists and rather credulous current involvement with ley lines and militant hippies, probably the most thoughtful and politically aware four-colour US mainstream comic. (See previous issues of *IZ* for more on Hellblazer and its charismatic protagonist John Constantine.)

Or could it be that unlikely cross between unsuccessful punk rocker and nascent superstar, Glaswegian Grant Morrison? Snaffled from the pages of *2000AD*, Morrison's current DC venture is *Animal Man*, a typical late 80s revamping of a hopelessly kitsch and underpowered hero, namely Buddy (sic) Baker, Los Angeles suburbanite, who can take on the powers of any animal passing nearby. Morrison started by imbuing the character with some charm in the form of a denim jacket to hide his awful costume and has gone on to spin a refreshing if unlikely mix of suburban angst and comedy (one episode features his wife literally kicking a supervillain out the house while the hapless hero rubs his head) together with liberal doses of

trendy concerns like vegetarianism and animal rights. Large helpings of surrealism don't hurt either – plenty of characters who know they're in a comic here – nor the creation of the world's first Glaswegian archvillain, complete with authentic patter.

But likeliest current contender for the crown of the Northampton demigod must be the relentlessly ubiquitous Neil Gaiman, with not one but two well-received recent series from DC. **Black Orchid** (3-issue mini-series, \$3.50 per issue) must be one of the most beautiful comic books to appear recently; scenes of verdant gardens and rainforests handpainted in lush purples and green alternate with grim scenes of violence and squalor rendered in greys and sepia. The art is the responsibility of Gaiman's previous collaborator on his "graphic short story," *Violent Cases*, Dave McKean, and as on the previous joint outing, the art takes precedence perhaps over the virtues of the script. But the story itself, an ecological fable of a mauve plant being who sometimes thinks she's a superheroine, is engrossing if undemanding and more importantly, the narrative mood created harmonizes pleasantly with the glorious artwork, to, at least sometimes, create something rich and strange.

Gaiman's other series, **Sandman**, (DC, monthly) is a more typically genre production; the Sandman is the supernatural Master of Dreams, trapped for seventy years by incompetent mages seeking control of his brother Death, until he escapes to try and reclaim his power and kingdom. Sandman's early imprisonment was neatly tied to the fascinating sleeping sickness epidemic of the Twenties (victims couldn't wake up because the dream continuum was disrupted) but subsequent episodes look set to decline into empty if wittily done gothic adventures.

But what of Alan Moore himself? (He's not dead yet, after all.) He's been occupied with altogether heavier concerns than superheroics in the form of the much ballyhooed **Brought To Light** (Titan, £4.95), supposedly the first of a new form, the "graphic docudrama" which seeks to popularize investigative political writing by presenting it in the striking format of a graphic novel (rather like the once fashionable practice of putting didactic essays on dialectical materialism into cartoon form). *Brought to Light* is in fact two books stuck back-to-back like the old Ace doubles; the leader, by Moore and Sienkiewicz, recounts forty years of history of covert operations and political destabilization by the CIA in stylized fashion, while the backup is a more straightforward account of the La Penca bombing of Contra leader Pastora which crippled several US journalists, and the subsequent investigation which seems to reveal CIA responsibil-

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ity for the atrocity. The subject matter may be relatively familiar to IZ readers but the format, as intended, does impart shock value (especially the Sienkewicz art, pulling out every last stop of distortion and grotesquerie). Whether these comic books can make any lasting political impact, though, remains to be seen.

Another political comic in a rather different format is *Crisis* (Fleetway, 65p fortnightly), a brave attempt to produce a radical mainstream comic for young adults within the confines of the traditionally juvenile UK newsstand market, which has garnered rave or, at least, interested reviews from publications as disparate as *The Independent* and *Marxism Today*. The lead story and chief success of *Crisis* is "Third World War," a convincing near-future satire on multinational exploitation of the Third World, featuring a black, feminist, anarchist heroine. Despite a slight tendency to sound like spoonfed A-level economics, it's convincing and aware storytelling with a lot of good points to make. Since the revamp in issue 15, the backup features are interesting too, especially "Troubled Souls," which takes on the issues of Northern Ireland terrorism.

And finally, back to the (sort of) lighter stuff: sex, at least, rather than politics. *Omaha the Cat Dancer*, by Reed Waller and Kate Warley, is another in the long tradition of comics where very human stories are told about characters depicted as funny animals (cf *Maus*). It's a soap opera about the life and times of Omaha, a dancer who also happens to be a cat, and her friends and lovers; it's frank, funny, intimidatingly perceptive and also shows a lot of explicit sexuality, which has made it fairly difficult to come by in this country. Two collected volumes from Kitchen Sink Press how-

ever (\$12.95) offer an opportunity to get involved in a thoughtful and enjoyable series.

Homage to Narcissus

Continued from page 44

paper. (The Los Angeles Times does tempt me with its "Food" section, and its "Entertainment" section, and its "Home" section, but even so, the nearest newspaper vending machine is a ten-minute drive away.) When I feel guilty about not getting enough exercise, I watch exercise videos (ah, those suntanned, nubile bodies!) and almost feel as if I've done the work-out myself. When I want to talk to someone, I activate my computer modem and watch banalities scroll up the screen, thus enjoying the illusion of social interaction without actually having to confront anyone.

I still buy books, once in a while, but it's like a reflex left over from an earlier stage of evolution. When the books reach home, they tend to sit on the shelf – it's so much effort, somehow, to squint at those pages of densely-packed type. Where are the pictures of beautiful people, fast cars, powerful gadgets, and glamorous attire?

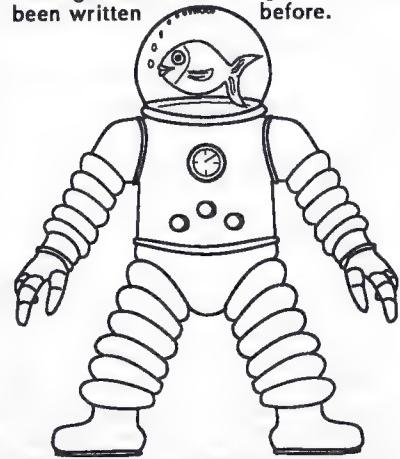
I don't yet have a suntan, and I haven't been fussing too much over my appearance, probably because I still feel unqualified to participate. I'm a mere spectator at the fashion parade at my local mall. But who knows? The way things are going, in two months from now, I may have surrendered the last of my inhibitions against Southern California. In my next column, instead of examining the world of books, I may digress into topics of greater social importance, such as (you guessed it) clothes and food.

Assuming, of course, I can summon the energy to write the column at all.
(Charles Platt)

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(David Pringle)

UK Books Received

April-May 1989

The following is a list of all sf, fantasy and horror titles, and books of related interest, received by Interzone during the period specified above. Official publication dates, where known, are given in italics at the end of each entry. Descriptive phrases in quotes following titles are taken from book covers rather than title pages. A listing here does not preclude a separate review in this issue (or in a future issue) of the magazine.

Anderson, Michael Falconer. **God of a Thousand Faces**. Heywood Books [55 Clissold Cres., London N16 9AR], ISBN 1-85481-006-5, 249pp, paperback, £1.50. (Horror novel, first published in 1987; one of the first titles from a new cheaply-priced paperback house.) 21st April.

Anderson, Michael Falconer. **The Woodsman**. Heywood Books, ISBN 1-85481-013-8, 156pp, paperback, £1.50. (Horror novel, first published in 1986.) 19th May.

Anthony, Piers. **Heaven Cent**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-49088-2, 324pp, trade paperback, £6.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; there is a simultaneous hardcover edition [not seen]; the latest in the "Xanth" series.) 15th June.

Asimov, Isaac. **Far as Human Eye Could See**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20281-1, 267pp, paperback, £3.99. (Essay collection, first published in the USA, 1987.) 25th May.

Berger, Thomas. **Being Invisible**. Methuen/Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0019-1, 262pp, paperback, £3.50. (Humorous fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 4th May.

Blaylock, James P. **Land of Dreams**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20177-7, 264pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 25th May.

Bova, Ben. **Kinsman**. Methuen/Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0021-3, 269pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; actually, it's a revision of an earlier edition [1979].) 4th May.

Bradfield, Scott. **The Secret Life of Houses**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440307-0, 166pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf/fantasy/mainstream collection, first published in 1988; by a writer who has appeared in Interzone: we recommend it.) 25th May.

Bradley, Marion Zimmer. **The Firebrand**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0126-8, 559pp, paperback, £3.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987; it's dedicated "To the memory of Mary Renault"; would that Bradley's prose could match that great writer's.) 20th April.

Britton, David. **Lord Horror**. Savoy Books [279 Deansgate, Manchester M3 4EW], ISBN 0-86130-072-6, 192pp, hardcover, £10.95. (Sf/fantasy/horror/unclassifiable novel, first edition; it says copyright "1990" inside [huh?].) 15th May.

Brosnan, John. **The Sky Lords**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04490-X, 318pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in 1988; the author and his publishers have managed to gather some impressive quotes for the flyleaf of this edition, including: "Sweeps along like a new broom, and bristles with entertainment" — Brian Aldiss.) 27th April.

Brown, Charles N., and William G. Contento. **Science Fiction, Fantasy, & Horror: 1987**. Locus Press/Mekkler, ISBN 0-88736-251-6, 417pp, hardcover, £34. ("A comprehensive bibliography of books and short fiction published in the English language";

this is of course an import from America, and it carries a 1988 copyright date.) 21st April.

Bujold, Lois McMaster. **Falling Free**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3242-3, 307pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 18th May.

Cherryh, C. J. **The Chronicles of Morgaine**. Methuen/Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0007-8, 682pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf/fantasy omnibus, containing: Gate of Ivrel, first published in the USA, 1976; Well of Shiuan, first published in the USA, 1978; and Fires of Azeroth, first published in the USA, 1979; this is the 4th Methuen [i.e. Mandarin] printing.) 6th April.

Cherryh, C. J. **Exile's Gate**. Methuen/Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0006-X, 414pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; a new title in the "Morgaine" series.) 6th April.

Cherryh, C. J. **Pride of Chanur**. "The saga of the Hani begins." Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0068-X, 224pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1982; according to the cover, there's a definite article in the title, but that's not how it's shown on the title page.) 1st June.

Clarke, Arthur C. **Astounding Days: A Science Fictional Autobiography**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04446-2, 224pp, hardcover, £12.95. (History of Clarke's love for, and association with, the magazine Astounding; a curiosity; first edition [?].) 11th May.

Cole, Adrian. **Mother of Storms: Star Requiem 1**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440306-2, 378pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Sf/fantasy novel, first edition.) 27th April.

Cooke, Catherine. **Realm of the Gods**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8297-8, 218pp, paperback, £2.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; sequel to "The Winged Assassin.") 8th June.

Cooper, Louise. **Infanta: Book 3 of Indigo**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440303-8, 318pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 27th April.

Dalton, Annie. **Night Maze**. Methuen, ISBN 0-416-13532-3, 256pp, hardcover, £8.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition.) 22nd May.

Darby, Lyndan. **Phoenix Fire: Book 3 of The Eye of Time Trilogy**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440153-1, 202pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 27th April.

Delany, Samuel R. **Return to Neveryon**. "Volume Four of his magnificent fantasy series." Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20273-0, 399pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy collection, first published in the USA as *The Bridge of Lost Desire*, 1987; this first UK edition appears to be slightly revised.) 15th June.

Dever, Joe, and John Grant. **Eclipse of the Kai: The Legends of Lone Wolf Book 1**. Arrow/Beaver, ISBN 0-09-963750-2, 237pp, paperback, £2.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition; based on the "Lone Wolf" roleplaying game books.) 1st June.

Dever, Joe, and John Grant. **The Dark Door Opens: The Legends of Lone Wolf Book 2**. Arrow/Beaver, ISBN 0-09-963760-X, 272pp, paperback, £2.50. (Juvenile fantasy novel, first edition.) 1st June.

Dick, Philip K. **The Divine Invasion**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20439-3, 270pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981; this is the first Grafton imprint.) 11th May.

Dickson, Gordon R. **The Chantry Guild**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0241-8, 428pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; latest in Dickson's "Childe

Cycle," or the "Dorsai" series as we used to call it.) 15th June.

Dickson, Gordon R. **Soldier, Ask Not**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7221-2978-5, 216pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1967; 12th Sphere printing.) 15th June.

Duane, Diane. **My Enemy, My Ally**. "Star Trek 21." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-129-0, 309pp, paperback, £2.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1984.) Late entry: March publication received in April.

Eddings, David. **Demon Lord of Karanda**. "Book Three of The Mallorean." Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-01563-0, 378pp, trade paperback, £6.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 18th May.

Erickson, Steve. **Rubicon Beach**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-3744-1, 300pp, paperback, £4.50. (Novel of the fantastic by the highly-praised author of *Days Between Stations*; first published in the USA, 1986.) 27th April.

Farris, John. **Scare Tactics**. Hodder & Stoughton, ISBN 0-340-50281-9, 310pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 1988; contains a short novel, a novella and a short story.) 18th May.

Ferguson, Neil. **Putting Out**. Sphere/Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10083-7, 205pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in 1988; a first novel by one of Interzone's discoveries: highly recommended.) 18th May.

Foster, Alan Dean. **To the Vanishing Point**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0426-7, 310pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 15th June.

Friedman, Michael Jan. **Double, Double**. "Star Trek 22." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-130-4, 308pp, paperback, £2.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, ?.) April.

Garnett, David S. **Zenith: The Best in New British Science Fiction**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0341-4, 298pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf anthology, first edition.) 15th June.

Gemmell, David A. **Knights of Dark Renown**. Century/Legend, ISBN 0-7126-2547-X, 400pp, trade paperback, £5.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; a simultaneous hardcover exists [not seen].) 11th May.

Godwin, Parke. **Waiting for the Galactic Bus**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-17594-7, 256pp, paperback, £2.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 15th June.

Grant, Charles L. **Nightmare Seasons**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4255-0, 256pp, paperback, £2.99. (Horror collection, first published in the USA, 1982.) 11th May.

Greenland, Colin. **Other Voices**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440309-7, 182pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1988.) 25th May.

Greenwood, Ed. **Spellfire**. "Forgotten Realms Fantasy Adventure." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-012129-3, 382pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 25th May.

Gregorian, Joyce Ballou. **The Broken Citadel: Volume One of The Tredana Trilogy**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8290-0, 333pp, paperback, £4.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1975.) 13th April.

Harbinson, Allen. **The Lodestone**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0006-7, 568pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first edition; looks to be latter-day Rider Haggard/Raiders of the Lost Ark stuff, with added sex.) 18th May.

Harrison, M. John. **The Committed Men**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04220-6,

- 223pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in 1971; a reissue, as "VGSF Classics 32," of Heinlein's first book.) 27th April.
- Heinlein, Robert A. **The Moon is a Harsh Mistress**. New English Library, ISBN 0-450-50280-5, 288pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1966; this appears to be the first UK hardcover printing since the Dobson edition of 1967; unfortunately, the print is terrible.) 1st June.
- Hogan, James P. **The Gentle Giants of Ganymede: Book Two of The Giants Trilogy**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20488-1, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1978.) 15th June.
- Hubbard, L. Ron. **Mission Earth Volume Three: The Enemy Within**. New Era, ISBN 1-870451-09-0, 429pp, paperback, £3.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 20th April.
- Hughart, Barry. **The Story of the Stone**. Bantam Press, ISBN 0-593-01711-0, 236pp, trade paperback, £6.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988; sequel to the World Fantasy Award-winning *Bridge of Birds*.) 20th April.
- Jeter, K. W. **Morlock Night**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20438-5, 190pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1979; a sequel of sorts to Wells's *The Time Machine*, it's billed as "the original Steam Punk novel.") 25th May.
- Jones, Stephen, ed. **Fantasy Tales, Vol. 10 No. 2**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-004-1, 104pp, paperback, £0.99. (Horror/fantasy collection; a hybrid book/magazine which we list here because it has an ISBN rather than an ISSN; it's the second issue to appear in this format.) 11th May.
- Kennedy, Leigh. **Saint Hiroshima**. Sphere/Abacus, ISBN 0-349-10064-0, 182pp, paperback, £3.99. (Non-sf novel by a writer associated with the field, first published in 1987.) Late entry: March publication received in April.
- Kerr, Katharine. **Darkspell**. "Volume II of the epic Deverry series." Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20079-7, 476pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 27th April.
- King, Bernard. **Witch-Beast**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0232-9, 278pp, paperback, £3.50. (Horror novel, first edition.) 20th April.
- Knaak, Richard A. **The Legend of Huma: Dragonlance Heroes Volume One**. Penguin, ISBN 0-14-011647-8, 379pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 27th April.
- Koontz, Dean R. **Midnight**. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-0124-2, 438pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) April.
- Koontz, Dean R., and others. **Night Fears**. Introduction by Clive Barker. Headline, ISBN 0-7472-3258-X, 308pp, paperback, £5.99. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA as *Night Visions 4*, 1987; contains original stories by Koontz, Edward Bryant and Robert R. McCammon.) 18th May.
- Lewis, Roy. **The Evolution Man**. Introduction by Terry Pratchett. Corgi, ISBN 0-552-99346-8, 160pp, paperback, £3.99. (Humorous sf novel, first published as *What We Did to Father* in 1960.) 15th June.
- Lindholm, Megan. **The Reindeer People**. Unwin, ISBN 0-04-440371-2, 266pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Historical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 25th May.
- Lively, Adam. **The Burnt House**. Simon & Schuster, ISBN 0-671-69999-7, 264pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Novel, "intercutting science fiction with a realistic picture of contemporary life," first edition.) 15th May.
- Martin, George R. R. **Fevre Dream**. Gollancz/VGSF, ISBN 0-575-04492-6, 350pp, paperback, £3.50. (Horror/fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1982.) 27th April.
- Matheson, Richard. **Earthbound**. Robinson, ISBN 1-85487-003-3, 186pp, hardcover, £10.95. (Horror novel, first published in the USA under the pseudonym "Logan Swanson," 1982.) 8th June.
- Moorcock, Michael. **The Fortress of the Pearl: An Elric Tale**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04515-9, 248pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition.) 8th June.
- Needleman, Jacob. **Sorcerers**. Penguin/Arkana, ISBN 0-14-019173-9, 235pp, paperback, £4.99. (Philosophical fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1986.) 12th June.
- Page, Kathy. **Island Paradise**. Methuen, ISBN 0-413-19690-9, 192pp, hardcover, £11.99. (Sf novel, first edition.) 1st June.
- Park, Paul. **Soldiers of Paradise: The Starbridge Chronicles**. Grafton, ISBN 0-586-20419-9, 365pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; it's the beginning of a series; a first novel.) 27th April.
- Perry, Steve. **The Man Who Never Missed**. "Volume 1 of the Matador Trilogy." Sphere, ISBN 0-7474-0348-1, 195pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1985.) 15th June.
- Pierce, Hayford. **Napoleon Disentimed**. Bantam, ISBN 0-553-17601-3, 317pp, paperback, £3.50. (Alternative-world sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; it's dedicated to Robert A. Heinlein, and has cover commendations from Robert Silverberg and Jack Vance.) 19th May.
- Pournelle, Jerry, and Roland Green. **Janissaries 3: Storms of Victory**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8298-6, 359pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 8th June.
- Pratchett, Terry. **Pyramids (The Book of Going Forth)**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04463-2, 272pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Fantasy novel, first edition; the latest "Discworld" adventure, this is the one that's heavily into Egyptology.) 15th June.
- Pratchett, Terry. **Sourcery**. "A Discworld Novel." Corgi, ISBN 0-552-13107-5, paperback, £2.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in 1988.) 15th June.
- Pringle, David. **Imaginary People: A Who's Who of Modern Fictional Characters**. Grafton/Paladin, ISBN 0-586-08744-3, 518pp, trade paperback, £7.99. (Reference book which straddles the genres; first published in 1987; this Paladin edition is slightly revised.) 13th April.
- Reed, Robert. **The Hormone Jungle**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8289-7, 300pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 13th April.
- Rice, Anne. **The Queen of the Damned: The Third Book in the Vampire Chronicles**. Macdonald, ISBN 0-356-17633-9, 448pp, hardcover, £11.95. (Fantasy/horror novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 13th April.
- Robinson, Kim Stanley. **The Gold Coast**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8295-1, 389pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; described as "a rich, brave book" by John Clute.) 11th May.
- Salvatore, R. A. **Streams of Silver. Book Two: The Icewind Dale Trilogy**. "Forgotten Realms Fantasy Adventure." Penguin, ISBN 0-14-012363-6, 342pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 27th April.
- Shaw, Bob. **The Wooden Spaceships**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4259-3, 294pp, paperback, £3.50. (Sf novel, first published in 1988; sequel to *The Ragged Astronauts*.) 11th May.
- Shepard, Lucius. **Life During Wartime**. Grafton/Paladin, ISBN 0-586-08797-4, 383pp, paperback, £4.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 27th April.
- Silverberg, Robert. **To the Land of the Living**. Gollancz, ISBN 0-575-04461-6, 308pp, hardcover, £12.95. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1989.) 27th April.
- Simak, Clifford D. **Highway of Eternity**. Mandarin, ISBN 0-7493-0038-8, 289pp, paperback, £2.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1986; Simak's last novel.) June.
- Springer, Nancy. **Mindbond: Sea King Trilogy 2**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8291-9, 243pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 13th April.
- Sturgeon, Theodore. **Venus Plus X**. Sphere, ISBN 0-7221-8214-7, 160pp, paperback, £2.50. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1960; 3rd Sphere printing.) 15th June.
- Tarr, Judith. **A Fall of Princes: Volume Three of Avaryan Rising**. Pan, ISBN 0-330-30321-X, 401pp, paperback, £3.99. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 5th May.
- Tepper, Sheri S. **The Awakeners**. Bantam, ISBN 0-552-13295-0, 512pp, paperback, £3.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1987; in America it's published in two volumes, Northshore and Southshore.) 19th May.
- Tessier, Thomas. **Rapture**. Futura, ISBN 0-7088-4242-9, 319pp, paperback, £3.50. (Psychological horror novel, first published in the USA, 1987.) 13th April.
- Weinstein, Howard. **The Covenant of the Crown**. "Star Trek 23." Titan, ISBN 1-85286-131-2, 191pp, paperback, £2.95. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1981 [?].) May.
- Wilder, Cherry. **Cruel Designs**. Piatkus, ISBN 0-86188-764-6, 266pp, hardcover, £10.95. (Horror novel, first edition [?].) Late entry: it carries a 1988 publication date, but was received by us in April 1989.
- Williams, Walter Jon. **Voice of the Whirlwind**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8294-3, 278pp, trade paperback, £6.99. (Sf novel, first published in the USA, 1988; a quasi-sequel to *Hardwired*.) 8th June.
- Williamson, J. N., ed. **Masques Two**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-4285-2, 221pp, paperback, £3.50. (Horror anthology, first published in the USA, 1987; original stories by just about everybody who's big in horror — King, Campbell, Matheson, Bloch, Herbert, etc.) 8th June.
- Yolen, Jane. **Sister Light, Sister Dark**. Futura/Orbit, ISBN 0-7088-8285-4, 252pp, paperback, £3.50. (Fantasy novel, first published in the USA, 1988.) 11th May.

Magazines Received

April-May 1989

The following is a list of all English-language sf- and fantasy-related journals, magazines and fanzines received by Interzone during the period specified above. It includes overseas publications as well as UK periodicals. (Some foreign titles reach us late if they have been posted seafarce.)

Aboriginal Science Fiction no. 14, March-April 1989. 64pp. Ed. Charles C. Ryan, PO Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849, USA.

Bimonthly fiction magazine with many full-colour illustrations. Contributors: David Brin, Robert A. Metzger, Darrell Schweitzer, etc. \$14 per annum, USA; \$17 overseas.

Aboriginal Science Fiction no. 15, May-June 1989. 64pp. Ed. Charles C. Ryan, PO Box 2449, Woburn, MA 01888-0849, USA. Bimonthly fiction magazine. Contributors: Larry Niven, Warren G. Rochelle, Patricia Anthony, etc. \$14 per annum, USA; \$17 overseas.

British Fantasy Newsletter vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 1989. 40pp. Ed. Paul Hiles, 78b Comiston Rd., Muswell Hill, London N10 2BN. Irregular fanzine for members of the British Fantasy Society. Contributors: Mike Ashley, John Gilbert, Di & Mike Wathen, etc. Membership of the BFS: £10 per annum, UK; £24, USA; send to Di Wathen, Secretary of the BFS, 15 Stanley Rd., Morden, Surrey SM4 5DE. Note: this issue came bundled with **Winter Chills** no. 3, a 44pp fiction magazine (ed. Peter Coleborn).

Critical Wave no. 10, undated (received in early April 1989). 20pp. Eds. Steve Green and Martin Tudor, 33 Scott Rd., Olton, Solihull, W. Midlands B92 7LQ. Bimonthly news magazine. Contributors: mainly Steve Green. £5 per annum, UK; \$10 USA. Note: it's hard to take seriously a news-zine which does not carry a date.

Critical Wave no. 11, undated (received in late May 1989). 20pp. Eds. Steve Green and Martin Tudor, 33 Scott Rd., Olton, Solihull, W. Midlands B92 7LQ. Bimonthly news magazine. Contributors: Steve Green, etc. (this one contains a short interview with Terry Pratchett). £5 per annum, UK; \$10 USA.

Dream Science Fiction no. 19, Spring 1989. 80pp. Ed. George P. Townsend, 7 Weller Place, High Elms Rd., Downe, Orpington, Kent BR6 7JW. Quarterly semi-professional fiction magazine. A5 size, with black-and-white illustrations, it's the best produced of the British sf "semi-prozines," though somewhat old-fashioned in tone. Contributors: Elizabeth & Erin Massey, Philip J. Backers, Dorothy Davies, etc. £7 per annum, UK; £8 elsewhere (subscriptions payable to the publisher: Trevor Jones, 1 Ravenshoe, Godmanchester, Huntingdon, Cambs. PE18 8DE).

Fear no. 6, May-June 1989. 84pp. Ed. John Gilbert, Research House, Fraser Rd., Perivale, Middlesex UB6 7AQ (note editorial new address). Bimonthly horror-movie magazine with some fiction. Contributors: Stephen Gallagher, Guy N. Smith, Stephen Laws, etc. £2.50 per issue. Note: they still seem to be discouraging subscriptions; maybe this is because Fear is going monthly from its next issue.

Foundation: The Review of Science Fiction no. 44, Winter 1988/89. 104pp. Ed. Edward James, c/o The Science Fiction Foundation, East London Polytechnic, Longbridge Rd., Dagenham RM8 2AS. Thrice-yearly critical journal of high quality (despite the published date, this issue didn't appear until May 1989). Contributors: K. V. Bailey, John Clute, Rachel Pollack, Mark Siegel, Gary K. Wolfe, etc. £8.50 per annum, UK; \$17, USA.

The Gate: Science Fiction & Fantasy no. 1, no date shown (received in April 1989). Ed. Maureen Porter, c/o 28 Savile Rd., Westwood, Peterborough PE3 7PR. A new quarterly fiction magazine in paperback-book format. Contributors: Brian Stableford, Alex Stewart, James White, etc. £8.50 per annum, UK (payable to "W Publishing"); no overseas rates shown.

Locus: The Newspaper of the SF Field no. 339, April 1989. 68pp. Ed. Charles N. Brown, PO Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661,

USA. Monthly news magazine. Contributors: Dan Chow, Richard Curtis, Faren Miller, etc. \$28 per annum, USA; \$32 se-mail or \$50 airmail, Europe. Note: the UK agent is Fantast (Medway) Ltd., PO Box 23, Upwell, Wisbech, Cambs. PE14 9BU.

Locus: The Newspaper of the SF Field no. 340, May 1989. 68pp. Ed. Charles N. Brown, PO Box 13305, Oakland, CA 94661, USA. Monthly news magazine. Contributors: Carolyn Cushman, Frank M. Robinson, Tom Whitmore, etc. \$28 per annum, USA; \$32 se-mail or \$50 airmail, Europe. Note: the UK agent is Fantast (Medway) Ltd., PO Box 23, Upwell, Wisbech, Cambs. PE14 9BU.

New Pathways into SF and Fantasy no. 14, May 1989. 72pp. Ed. Michael G. Adkisson, MGA Services, PO Box 863994, Plano, TX 75086-3994, USA. Quarterly fiction magazine. Contributors: Brian Aldiss, Lewis Shiner, John Shirley, etc. This issue shows an increase in size and sophistication; it's a developing magazine. \$12 per annum, USA; \$15, Europe (payable to "MGA Services").

New York Review of Science Fiction no. 8, April 1989. 24pp. Eds. Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell and Susan Palwick, Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA. Monthly review magazine. Contributors: David Langford, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Paul Williams, etc. \$24 per annum, USA; \$36 overseas.

New York Review of Science Fiction no. 9, May 1989. 24pp. Eds. Kathryn Cramer, David G. Hartwell and Susan Palwick, Dragon Press, PO Box 78, Pleasantville, NY 10570, USA. Monthly review magazine. Contributors: Brian Stableford, Tom Whitmore, Lois Tilton, etc. \$24 per annum, USA; \$36 overseas.

Science Fiction Chronicle no. 115, April 1989. 46pp. Ed. Andrew I. Porter, PO Box 2730, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0056, USA. Monthly news magazine. Contributors: Steve Jones & Jo Fletcher, Frederik Pohl, etc. \$27 per annum, USA; £21, UK (the latter payable to "Algol Press," c/o Ethel Lindsay, 69 Barry Rd., Carnoustie, Angus DD7 7QQ).

Science Fiction Chronicle no. 116, May 1989. 46pp. Ed. Andrew I. Porter, PO Box 2730, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0056, USA. Monthly news magazine. Contributors: Ed Naha, Steve Jones & Jo Fletcher, Don D'Amassa, etc. \$27 per annum, USA; £21, UK (the latter payable to "Algol Press," c/o Ethel Lindsay, 69 Barry Rd., Carnoustie, Angus DD7 7QQ).

Science Fiction Chronicle no. 117, June 1989. 50pp. Ed. Andrew I. Porter, PO Box 2730, Brooklyn, NY 11202-0056, USA. Monthly news magazine. Contributors: the usual (see above). \$27 per annum, USA; £21, UK (the latter payable to "Algol Press," c/o Ethel Lindsay, 69 Barry Rd., Carnoustie, Angus DD7 7QQ).

SF Commentary no. 67, January 1989. 40pp. Ed. Bruce Gillespie, GPO Box 5195AA, Melbourne, Victoria 3001, Australia. Irregular fanzine: production quality fairly low, but intellectual content high. This one came as a surprise; it's Bruce's first new issue of this much-admired fanzine in a long, long time (its heyday was the late 1960s and early-to-mid 70s). Contributors: Thomas M. Disch, Michael Tolley, etc. \$25 Australian for six issues; £15 for five, UK.

Thrust: SF & Fantasy Review no. 33, Spring 1989. 32pp. Ed. D. Douglas Fratz, 8217 Langport Terrace, Gaithersburg, MD 20877, USA. Quarterly review magazine. Contributors: Richard E. Geis, Charles Platt (reprinted from Interzone), John Shirley, etc. \$8 per annum, USA; \$10 overseas (payable

to "Thrust Publications").

Vector: The Critical Journal of the British Science Fiction Association no. 149, April-May 1989. 24pp. Ed. David V. Barrett, 23 Oakfield Rd., Croydon, Surrey CR0 2UD. Bimonthly critical fanzine. Contributors: John Newsinger, Andy Sawyer, etc. Membership of the BSFA: £10 per annum; \$20 (or \$35 air), USA; send to Joanne Raine, Membership Secretary, 33 Thornville Rd., Hartlepool, Cleveland TS26 8EW. Note: this issue came bundled with **Matrix** no. 81, a 24pp newsletter (ed. Maureen Porter); **Paperback Inferno** no. 77, a 16pp review of paperbacks (ed. Andy Sawyer); and **Focus** no. 17, a 12pp magazine for aspiring writers (ed. Liz Holliday).

Works no. 3, "Winter 1988" (received in April 1989). 52pp. Eds. Dave Hughes and Andy Stewart, 12 Blakesones Rd., Slaitwaite, Huddersfield HD7 5UQ. Quarterly amateur "magazine of imaginative and speculative fiction." A5 size, with laminated cover and black-and-white illustrations. Contributors: Laura Jacobsen, Pat Khan, Matthew Dickens, etc. £4.50 per annum, UK; no overseas rate shown.



Inter-action

Dear Editors:

I have always preferred novels to short stories but I bought a copy of IZ 26 from W.H. Smith's out of curiosity. I have to say I have been very impressed and now subscribe to the magazine. I've particularly enjoyed the stories "Dark Night in Toyland" and "To the Letter" by Bob Shaw, "Soft Clocks" by Yoshio Aramaki, "The Outside Door" by Lyle Hopwood and the extract from "Wyrd Sisters" by Terry Pratchett.

My reason for writing is to pass comment on the apparently unending stream of hate mail aimed at Charles Platt. Any decent "comment" column is going to annoy people sometimes. If everyone agreed with what he said all the time would it be worth printing? Personally as someone who thinks that that word "science" should appear somewhere in the definition of "science fiction" but also enjoys playing Role Playing Games, I would like to offer a hearty one-and-a-half cheers to "The Triumph of Whimsy."

Neil Hoggarth
Loughborough

Dear Editors:

I'm quick enough to write when I don't like something in IZ, especially a Charles Platt article, so it's only fair I write and say when I'm impressed with something. Platt's "The Vanishing Midlist" was a very informative and well-written piece. So many of us at the start of the relay don't know what the hell goes on after we hand over the baton to the agent (or directly to the publisher) and it is articles like this that help draw a few pictures for us. I would love to see an article on facts and figures regarding reviewers – not reviewers in the genre publications like IZ and Vector – but the nationals. How many books are dumped on their desk each week? How do they make their choice? Why do they ignore genre books and deal almost completely with general fiction, or more specifically, "literary novels," when genre books are historically as valid as any other novel? How do they justify this fictional snobbery? etc etc. Anyway, an interesting Platt article.

Garry Kilworth
Hong Kong

Dear Editors:

It was interesting to see Charles Platt in IZ 29 writing on the practice of "sequels" to sf's classic scenarios: "When this kind of practice first started, there was some stigma attached to it. But I myself have written a couple of books set in Piers Anthony's 'Chthon universe'..." Ah well, that's all right, isn't it? But seriously, (while you can't blame them for wanting lots of figures on a cheque from a publisher) I wonder if the entry of writers such as Silverberg and Benford (and Platt himself) into this field is more depressing than the practice of hiring some struggling hack for a quick wallow in a world created by someone far more talented. The latter is at least, however cynical the motives, a way for someone with ability to get themselves established and study the ground-rules of their craft: after all, Michael Moorcock was not doing something too different in his early years (see the second paragraph of Colin Greenland's interview with him in the same issue of IZ.) The former is arguably a diminution of choice. It conjures up a nightmare vision of a few "big names" engaged in writing and rewriting each other's stories for ever and ever, amen.

But there are other ways of looking at it. The practice of coming up with "sequels" to another's bestsellers isn't confined to sf and perhaps it's a bit surprising that it took so long to become established. Maybe it's a sign that there is a body of work worth cannibalizing? Ian Fleming's death didn't stop the James Bond books, and there are some excellent books suggesting what might have happened after Treasure Island (Robert Leeson's Silver's Revenge is one). If writer's are encouraged not to use their imaginations and pick up on ideas and implications not developed in the original (as does the children's writer Jan Needle in his "rewriting" of Kenneth Grahame's The Wind in the Willows from the viewpoint of those nasty working-class weasels of the Wild Wood) then readers will be offered something that justifies the hype. At the moment, though, the omens don't look too good. I can't say I was impressed by Platt's "Chthon" book, *Plasm*, but then again, I didn't think much of the originals. My opinion of Paul Preuss's "Venus Prime" books is simply that linking the Arthur C. Clarke stories on which they're based into a wider and ongoing whole is potentially a good idea. It's a pity that what Preuss – who presumably is writing to a brief – has come up with is so tedious. In the end, the books don't add anything to the Clarke stories at all, and the only parts of the series which seem to have anything to offer are those which stem from Clarke's brain in the first place.

To be positive: a very good Moorcock interview, an excellent Stableford

story and I particularly loved Greg Egan's "The Cutie," which moved me almost to tears.

Andy Sawyer
South Wirral

Dear Editors:

It strikes me, after reading "The Village Alien" and "Primal Hooting" by Thomas Disch, that Whitley Streiber appears to have contracted that curious mental aberration known as "Hubbard's Disease" – the bane of psychologists, literary critics, and anyone with an ounce of common sense.

There are several sufferers of this condition in the public eye: they are those who have cynically set out to present a work of fiction as "fact" in order to capitalize on the gullibility of the average person. This is often done with a religious bent. Religions are, after all, by definition beyond reproach.

There are victims of Hubbard's Disease whose minds are so screwed up (to use a technical term) that they actually believe whatever it is they're preaching. These people can be dangerous – with their warped sense of logic it naturally follows that a non-believer is an enemy, and they can get quite upset when you point out that their creed is a load of shit.

For God's sake, how can anyone take Whitley Streiber seriously? Still, for that matter, how could anyone take Scientology seriously?

The sad thing about Hubbard's Disease is that US society appears to have created in itself the perfect spawning ground for this noxious condition. Of course, other countries are not immune. Far from it, there have been a fair few svengalis in Europe – most of them political as opposed to religious.

On another note: I read with interest and foreboding Charles Platt's article on the decline of the midlist: for once he had something worthwhile to say. It seems that today any novel that does not cater to the mindless masses can only become a bestseller by generating controversy. I was going to suggest that books of literary merit only become bestsellers by being controversial, à la Salman Rushdie Affair. But, of course, there was Peter Wright's *Spycatcher* – an uninteresting book by all accounts that only sold as well as it did because of the present government's stupidity.

All of this points to the ludicrous and frightening scenario of publishers or authors deliberately offending certain sections of the world's population in order to guarantee sales of their books. As the famous Hollywood maxim goes: any publicity is good publicity.

But if you have to live under constant death threats, surely your Art is going to suffer?

But then again, surely it is the right of any person in the Free World to say

what he/she wants to without fear of violence from narrow-minded minorities?

Anyway, issue 29 has to be the best yet. The fiction was all excellent. However, why does John Clute feel he has to outwrite the authors of the books he reviews? This week I needed a dictionary to understand most of it. Nobody is going to hold up a book review column as the pinnacle of modern literature, so who is he trying to impress? Or does he talk like that in real life?

Ian Sales
Mansfield

Dear Editors:

As co-editor of the newly re-vamped Opus magazine, I would like to reply to Roger Elner of Ulverston ("Interaction," IZ 29).

I find it a little unbelievable that he can come to the conclusion that "small-press efforts" like Dream and Opus are all "filled with rip-off stories written by semi-literate morons,"

while Interzone is filled with "good writing, intelligent and original plots," etc.

Mr Elner obviously hasn't read Dream or Opus much, or he would have noticed that many Interzone writers also contribute stories to these two magazines - writers like Eric Brown, Garry Kilworth, Keith Brooke, Kim Newman, S.M. Baxter, William King and others.

I wonder whether, if we published all the Interzone stories in Opus and vice versa, Mr Elner would come to the same conclusion. I get the feeling he would!

Surely if this person is really interested in the development of science fiction, as it seems he is from the tone of his letter, he should look beyond the shelves of W.H. Smith's and take an interest in the exciting developments in the more "underground" magazines which tend to be more in touch, more on the street, and more varied in their coverage of the

world around them. For instance, the new Opus has expanded with more involvement from people with different interests, but still with the same enthusiasm and healthy subversive natures which we know many young people want from a magazine. Something they are not getting from the mainstream, mass-produced shit.

And if we find the spark of youth still glaring bright in older generations, such as the legendary and controversial Bruce P. Baker, then we're happy to print such stories. If the supposedly young and forward-looking people who write into Interzone fail to appreciate the value of the words of an experienced, intelligent and enthusiastic man, then we deem them the "old" ones and wish them well on their trips down to Smith's while they blissfully miss the exciting developments in the "real" world of sf.

Mike Hearn
Broxbourne

WRITE TO INTERZONE

We enjoy receiving feedback from our readers, and we hope to publish a lively letter column in each issue. Please send your comments, opinions, reactions, to the magazine's main editorial address. We may not be able to reply to all letters, but we do read them and may well be influenced by them.

WORKS, a new sf magazine, has received favourable reviews on the small-press circuit. We are publishing, or are going to publish, Brian Aldiss, Ian Watson, Chris Evans, Jennings, Simon Clark, Des Lewis, Steve Sneyd, Andy Darlington and other, lesser known writers of equal distinction. Issue #1 has now sold out, #2 and #3 are still available, #4 should be published by the time this ad appears. Sample copy £1.25, year's subscription £4.50, from 12 Blakesones Rd., Slaithwaite, Huddersfield, Yorkshire HD7 5UQ.

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Continued from page 4

first G. W. Books anthology; and others who would prefer to remain anonymous for the present. Another series of adventure books, based on the game "Dark Future," will also contain lively stories by Jack Yeovil (Newman), Brian Craig (Stableford), the ubiquitous William King, and such new writers as Neil McIntosh and Neil Jones.

RIVALS...

It turns out that the editor of the new sf quarterly, *The Gate*, is none other than Maureen Porter, well known to members of the British Science Fiction Association as editor of the news-fan-zine Matrix. Her assistant editor is Paul Kincaid, who has contributed several interviews to IZ. A few issues ago I announced, erroneously, that the editor would be one Richard Newcombe, but it seems he is content to remain the magazine's owner and publisher. Maureen's taste runs to fairly unconventional sf and fantasy, and as a result *The Gate* is far from being the trad sci-fi publication that everyone expected. But we shall see. It still has to find its own voice, and I hope that it lives long enough to do so.

The year-old horror magazine *Fear* has evidently achieved the sort of commercial success which its publishers hoped for. It moved from a bimonthly to a monthly schedule with its July issue, and has also dropped its cover price. Editor John Gilbert seems to have discovered that "newsy" content, particularly coverage of the fantasy film scene, appeals most to his readers – and the amount of fiction which the magazine contains has been decreased

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We have already been going for over seven years, and we have moved from quarterly to bimonthly publication, so early "lifetimers" bought a bargain! Lifetime subscriptions to *Interzone* now cost £100 (UK); \$200 or equivalent (overseas); \$250 or equivalent (overseas air mail). Please make your cheque payable to "Interzone" and send it to our main editorial address, shown on page 3.

accordingly. But *Fear* still represents one of the all-too-few UK markets for fantastic fiction. (See our "Magazines Received" column for the addresses of the journals mentioned here, plus a few others.)

PERHAPS, ONE DAY

It would be marvellous if *Interzone* could go monthly too. The amount of publishable fiction available to us certainly justifies such a move, but the

economic consequences of more frequent publication are rather daunting. Certainly, our typesetter and printers would be happy to earn double the money. And aspiring writers would no doubt be delighted to have double the opportunity of publication. But what do readers think? Would our present subscribers be happy to pay twice as much for an annual subscription? Would purchasers from bookshops and newsagents be willing to buy twice as many magazines in the space of a year? Whatever your feelings, positive or negative, I'd be grateful for any relevant comments from subscribers or regular buyers. (David Pringle)

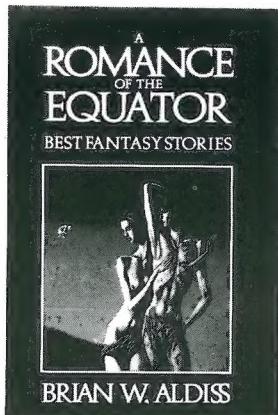
Afterword: this issue's cover artist, David Hardy, informs us that he has a major new book coming out in the UK this autumn from Dragon's World/Paper Tiger. It's an international co-publication which will be appearing simultaneously in the USA and elsewhere. Entitled *Visions of Space*, it is the first big retrospective volume on "space art" through the ages, with reproductions of work by many different hands – the whole compiled and designed, and with a text, by David Hardy.

Note: Back issues of *Interzone* are still readily available (except for issues 1, 5 and 7) but from this month we are increasing the price: single back-issues, or single copies of the current issue bought from us by post, are now £2.30 (postage included). Those who buy three or more back issues at the same time, however, may still have them at the old price of £1.95 each (i.e. post-free).

COMING NEXT ISSUE

One of the most powerful line-ups of fiction it has ever been our pleasure to bring you: six stories, mainly on political themes. They include "Mosquito" by Richard Calder – perhaps the best new British author we have discovered all decade – and hard-hitting pieces by two other writers who are appearing in *Interzone* for the first time (although they have been winning high reputations elsewhere): Ian McDonald and Nicholas Royle. Plus mordant new tales by three we have published before: Barrington Bayley, Lee Montgomerie and David Redd. And all our usual non-fiction. Don't miss it!

SF AND FANTASY FOR AUGUST



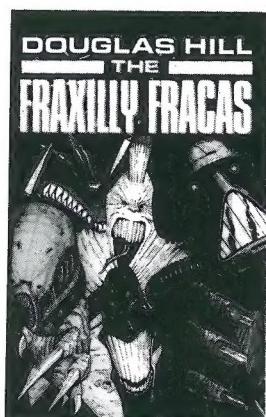
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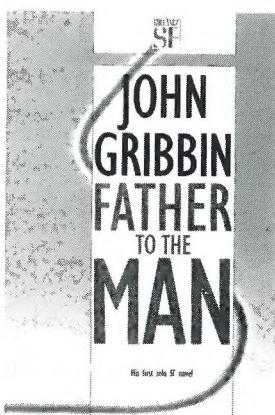


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